

The Way of Perfection

Section 2: Foundations of Prayer

Love of Neighbor (Charity)

Chapters 4-7 (summary)

Saint Teresa of Avila

Chapter 4 Urges the observance of the rule and discusses three things that are important for the spiritual life. Explains the first of these, which is love of neighbor, and how particular friendships do harm.

Introduction

Now, Daughters ... what do you think we must be like

if we are not to be considered very bold by God and the world? Clearly, we must **work hard**, and it helps a great deal to have **lofty thoughts** so that we will exert ourselves and make our **deeds** comply with our **thoughts**. For if we strive to **observe our rule** and **constitutions** very carefully, I hope ... that our prayer will be heard.

I am not beseeching you to do something new, my daughters, but only that we **observe** what we **profess** ... this is our **vocation** and **obligation**

2. Our **primitive rule** states that we must **pray without ceasing** ... It is the most important aspect of the rule—the fasts, disciplines and silence the order commands will not be wanting ... If prayer is to be **genuine**, it must be helped by these other things; **prayer** and **comfortable** living are incompatible.

3. It is about prayer that you have asked me to say something ... Before I say anything about ... prayer, I shall mention some things that are **necessary** for those who seek to follow the **way of prayer**; so necessary that even those who are not very contemplative, can be far advanced in the service of the Lord if they possess these things ...

4. ... I shall not **burden** you with many things ... we shall do what our **holy fathers** established and observed ... It would be wrong to ... try to learn this path from anyone else. I shall enlarge on only **three things** which are from our **constitutions**. It is important to understand how much the **practice** of these three things helps us to possess ... the peace our Lord recommended so highly to us. The **first** of

these is **love for one another** (or charity); the **second** is **detachment** for all created things; and the **third** is true **humility** which is in fact the **main practice** and **embraces all the others**.

Love for One Another (or Charity)

5. About the **first, love for one another**, it is most important we have this; something annoying is suffered more easily by those who love one another ... But ... we never reach the point of observing this commandment perfectly.

It may seem that having **excessive love** among ourselves could not be evil, but such excess carries so much evil with it ... The devil lays many snares here ... Those interested in **perfection** have a deep understanding of this excessive love, because it gradually takes away the **strength of will** to be **totally occupied in loving God**.

6. ... This **excessive love** must be found among women even more than among men; the **harm** it does in the community is well known. It gives rise to: **failing to love equally all the others; feeling sorry about any affront to the friend; desiring possessions so as to give her gifts; looking for time to speak with her** ... often about trifling things rather than about your love for God. These great friendships are seldom directed toward helping one love God more. On the contrary, I think the devil gets them started to promote factions in religious orders. When love is in the service of His Majesty, the **will** does not proceed with passion but by seeking help to conquer other passions.

7. I should like that there be many of these friendships where there is a large community, but in this house where there are no more than **thirteen** - nor must there be any more — **all must be friends, all must be loved, all must be held dear, all must be helped** ...

Watch out for these **friendships** ... however holy they may be ... they can be **poisonous**. I see no benefit in them. And if the friends are **relatives**, the situation is much worse – it's a pestilence! ... Even though this kind of talk seems extreme, **great perfection** and **great peace** lie in keeping my advice. If the **will** is drawn to one more than to another ... this is **natural** ... but let us be careful

not to allow ourselves to be dominated by that affection. Let us love the **virtues** ...

8. Let us not **condescend**, oh daughters, to allow our **wills** to be **slaves** to anyone, save to the One who bought our wills with His blood. Be aware that, without understanding how, you will find yourselves so **attached** ... and unable to manage the attachment...

9. To break away from these friendships ... should be done delicately and lovingly ... It is important that the friends avoid being together and speaking to each other save at the designated hours. This would be in conformity with the custom we now follow, which is that ... each one is **alone** in her own **cell**, as the rule commands ... **Silence** is better observed when each nun is by herself; to get used to **solitude** is a great help for **prayer**, the foundation of this house. We must strive to dedicate ourselves to what helps us most in prayer.

10. Returning to the subject of our loving one another. There are persons who can be like brutes and who will not love each other ... They believe that God loves them and they Him, since for His sake they have left everything? I say this since **virtue always inspires love**, and I hope in His Majesty that those living in this house will with the help of God always be **virtuous**....

11. Now I would like to say how this **love for one another** must be **practiced**. I would like to speak of the **nature of virtuous love** – I want practiced here – and how we know if we have this love; for our Lord highly recommended it to His apostles ...

Confessors

12. **Two kinds of love** are what I am dealing with: one is **spiritual** ... as it does not take away purity. The other is **spiritual** mixed with **sensuality** ...

13. I want to speak of the love that is **spiritual**, not affected by any passion ... If we deal with **virtuous persons** discreetly and moderately, especially **confessors**, we will benefit. If you should become aware that the confessor is turning toward some vanity, be suspicious about everything... make your confession briefly and bring it to a conclusion. It would be best to tell the prioress that your soul doesn't get on well with him and change

confessors... If you can, do it without hurting his reputation.

14. In similar cases ... in which one does not know **what counsel to take**, the **best thing** to do is try to speak with some learned person; when necessary there should be freedom to do this ... do what he tells you to do about the matter ... How many **mistakes** have been made in the world by doing things without counsel ... Thus what I have said about trying to speak with **another confessor** is what is best to do ... if there be an opportunity...

15. Keep in mind that ... such a **friendship** is **dangerous, harmful** and a **hell** for all the Sisters ... You should in the beginning cut the relationship short by every possible means ... I hope in the Lord that He will not permit persons ... always engaged in prayer to be able to love anyone who is not the **Lord's great servant** ... For if they see that a person doesn't understand their **language** and love to speak of God, they will not be able to love him, because he will not be like them. If he is like them, ... he will not want to disturb them.

16. I have begun to speak of this matter because the **harm** the devil can cause here is great, and is only slowly recognized ... A situation like this could disturb all the nuns and if restricted to one confessor they don't know what to do or how to be at peace. It is the one who should be calming them and providing a remedy who is causing the harm ...

Chapter 5 Continues on the subject of confessors. Speak of the importance of their being learned.

May the Lord ... not allow anyone in this house to undergo this trial ... of finding oneself in this affliction of body and soul. Nor may He allow a situation where no one dares to speak to either because the prioress and the confessor get along well ... The temptation would be to omit confessing serious sins for fear of being disturbed ... It seems that if they ask to go to another confessor the harmony of religious life will be lost.

2. I ask ... that this holy freedom ... to sometimes speak and discuss their souls with learned persons, especially when, no matter how good, the ordinary confessor is not learned ... It is possible to find both learning and goodness in some persons. The more

the Lord favors you in prayer, the more necessary it is for your **prayer** and **good works** to have a **good foundation**.

3. ... The **cornerstone** must be a **good conscience** and ... you must strive to free yourself from **venial sins** and seek what is most **perfect**. It will seem to you that any confessor knows this, but that is misleading ...

4. Having **true light** at our disposal to keep **God's law** with **perfection** is all our good; prayer is well founded on such light. Without this strong foundation and if the Sisters are not free to confess and discuss their souls ... the whole building will be **wobbly**...even if the confessor has all the qualities mentioned, it is still sometimes good to consult others because he may be mistaken and mislead all ... Though never act contrary to obedience... it is good to **seek counsel** so valuable to the soul.

5. I urge the prioress to seek the **soul's consolation** by doing what I said There will be no lack of holy persons who want to speak to you about your souls and bring you comfort—if your souls are what they should be ... Even if the devil tempts a confessor to deceive him about a doctrine he will be careful ... knowing you speak to others ...

6. I have seen and understood ... what was most suitable for this house to ensure **progress** along the **path of perfection** ... This is a lesser danger. Neither the Vicar nor the confessor should be the superior. They are to protect the recollection of the house and its progress.

7. This is our **practice** at present ... it was decided upon by good persons and sought from God with many **prayers for enlightenment** about the best thing to do. From what is known up until the present, this is the **best practice**. May the Lord be pleased to preserve it always since it is for His greater glory, amen.

Chapter 6 Returns to the subject already begun, that of perfect love.

I have digressed enough, but what was said was very important ... Let us return now to love that is good ... **purely spiritual love** ... **few** have it ... such a person must have reached the **highest perfection** ... When **virtue** is placed before our

eyes, the one who desires it, **grows fond** of it and **seeks** to gain it.

2. May it please God that I understand this love; and even more, that I know how to speak of it. For I don't think I know which love is spiritual, or when sensual love is mixed with it...

3. ... Those whom God brings to a certain **clear knowledge**, love very differently than do those who have not reached it. This **clear knowledge** is about the **nature** of the **world**, that there is **another world**, about the **difference** between them. One is **eternal** and the other a **dream**; or about the nature of loving the **Creator** and loving the **creature**. This knowledge comes from **seeing** and **feeling** what is **gained** by the one love and **lost** by the other, and what the Creator is and what the creature is, and from many other things that the **Lord teaches** to **anyone** who **wants to be taught by Him** in **prayer** or whom His Majesty **desires to teach**.

4. It may be, Sisters, that you think it **useless** for me to speak of this love saying that everybody already knows these things... Whoever the Lord brings to the **state of perfection** has this love. They are **generous** and **majestic souls**. They are not content with just loving these wretched bodies ... if so they wouldn't have the **courage**, without great shame, to tell God they love Him.

5. You will tell me that such **perfect persons** do not know how to love or repay the love others have for them ... but for them, unless the souls of others will **benefit** whether by **doctrine** or by **prayer**, all other **affection wears** these persons... They repay the love of others by recommending them to **God's care** as they know love comes from Him... They leave it to His Majesty to repay those who love them ... In this way they remain **free** ...

6. Note well that when we **desire love** from someone, there is always a kind of seeking our own **benefit** or **satisfaction**. These **perfect persons** have already trampled underfoot all the good things and comforts the world has to offer them. Their **consolations** ... though they may desire them... cannot be tolerated apart from God or from speaking of Him. For what **benefit** can come to them from being loved?

7. ... Although our affection is good, the desire that it be **repaid** is very **natural**. But once we receive

the payment, we realize it is all straw; it's all air ... for the wind to carry away.

8. ... As soon as these persons love, they go beyond the body and turn their eyes to the **soul** ... if they see some **beginning** and **readiness** so that if they love this soul and dig in this mine they will find **gold**, their **labor** causes them **no pain** ... There is nothing they wouldn't do for this soul ...

But they know that if it does not **love God** very much and **have His blessings**, their loving it is impossible ...

These persons with perfect love will not be **deceived**. They see that they are not one with the other ... It is a love that **must end** ... if the other is not keeping the **law of God** and does not **love God** and the two must then go to their **different destinies**.

9. And one of these persons to whom the Lord has given **true wisdom** cannot esteem this love, which lasts only here on earth ...

Those who like to find their pleasure in the things of the world ... will attribute some value to whether the other is rich or has the means to provide for diversion and recreation. But the one who has already come to abhor all of this, cares little or nothing about such things.

In the case of **perfect love**, if a person loves there is the passion to make the other soul worthy of being loved. This person knows that otherwise he will not continue to love the other. It is a love that **costs** dearly. This person does everything he can for the other's benefit; he would lose a thousand lives that a little good might come to the other soul. O precious love that imitates the Commander -in-chief of love, Jesus, our Good!

Chapter 7 Treats of the same subject, spiritual love, and gives some advice on how to obtain it.

It's strange how **impassioned** this love is, the **tears** it costs, the **penance** and **prayer**; what concern to ask prayers for the one loved from all who it thinks can help that person toward God; what constant desire that others recommend him to God. It is not happy unless it sees that person making progress. If, on the other hand, it sees him improving and then turning back, there doesn't seem to be any pleasure for it in life. It neither eats nor sleeps without this

care about the other. It is always fearful lest the soul it loves so much be lost and the two be separated for ever. Death here below matters nothing to it. It doesn't want to become attached to anything that in a mere moment escapes from one's hand and cannot be grasped again. It is a love with **no self-interest** at all. All that it desires is to see the other soul rich with heavenly blessings.

2. This is what love is, and not these other miserable **earthly affections** ... We must never tire of condemning anything that leads to hell Do not allow that this type of love be spoken of in your presence ... You may speak about the licit (acceptable) love I mentioned, which we have for one another or for relatives and friends ...

3. **Spiritual love** is not like this ... This love would much rather suffer the trial itself than see the other suffer it if the merit and gain from the suffering could be given to the other entirely – but not because this love is disquieted and disturbed.

4. ... **Spiritual love** seems to be **imitating** the love the good lover Jesus had for us. Thus, these lovers advance so far because they **embrace all trials**. And the others, without trial, receive benefit from those who love ... These lovers cannot in their hearts be insincere with those they love; if they see them deviate from the path... they immediately tell them about it ... and either that person mend his ways or the friendship is broken ...

There is a continual war between the **two attitudes** these lovers have; on the one hand, they go about forgetful of the whole world ... keeping only account of themselves; on the other hand, with their friends ... if they see the tiniest speck. I say that they bear a truly heavy cross.

... When you know a person like this ... strive that he speak with you. Love such persons as much as you like. They must be few... When however you reach perfection ... speaking with him is unnecessary; it is enough to have God. A good means of having God is to speak with his friends, one gains much from this. I know from experience. After the Lord, it is because of persons like these that I am not in hell; I strove to have them pray for me ... Now let us return to our subject.

5. This **spiritual love** is the **kind of love I would like us to have** ... Though this love bear some

natural tenderness, there is no harm provided it be shown to **all** ... Do not fail to be **compassionate** ... Let us not **judge** ... nor let us think that we are at a stage where the lord ... has made us **stronger**, but let us think of the stage when we were **weaker**.

6. Consider this advice to know how to sympathize with your neighbor in his trials, however small, is important ... It is necessary for those who are now strong to remember they were once weak and that their strength doesn't come from them. The devil could by this means make **charity grow cold**, and make us think that what is a fault belongs to perfection ... This is truer in those advancing in perfection ... It seems the harm is not recognized until it is already done ... In sum, it is necessary to watch and pray always for there is no better remedy than prayer to discover and bring the secret things of the devil to light.

7. Strive also to take time for **recreation** with the Sisters ... for all done with **pure intention** is **perfect love** ... I hope in God that in this house there will be no opportunity for any other kind of love than **perfect love** ... And always **grieve** over any **fault** in a Sister... Here love shows itself, and is practiced well when you know how to **suffer the fault** and not be surprised; so that others will do the same with respect to your faults, for you may have many more than you are aware of. Recommend the Sister to God and strive to **practice with great perfection the virtue opposite the fault** that appears in her ... The imitation of the virtue in which one sees another excel has a great tendency to spread. This is good advice; don't forget it.

8. How good and true the love of the Sister able to help others by setting aside her own needs. She will make much **progress** in all the **virtues** and keep her **rule** with great perfection. Better friendship will this be than all the tender words that can be said... they are to be **reserved** only for your Spouse... These words are very **womanish** ... and I would not want you to be womanish in anything ... but like strong men. For if you do what lies in your power, the Lord will make you so strong that you will astonish men. And how easy this is for His Majesty...

9. Another very good **proof of love** is that you strive in household duties to relieve others of work,

and rejoice ... for any increase you see in their virtues. All these things ... help very much to further **peace** and **conformity** between the Sisters ... May it please His Majesty that this love always continue ... The contrary would be a terrible thing.

10. If by chance some little word should escape, try to remedy the matter immediately and pray intensely. And if things of this sort against charity continue ... consider yourselves lost. Think and believe that you have thrown your Spouse out of the house ... Cry out to His Majesty. Seek a remedy; if you don't find one after frequent confession and Communion ... fear a Judas among you.

11. Let the prioress ... root out these concerns from the beginning; all the **harm** or all the **remedy** will depend on whether she does this or not. If **love** doesn't suffice, let it be done with **severe punishments**. Anyone found to cause such disturbance should be sent to another monastery ... Get rid of this **pestilence** ... If this isn't enough pull up the **roots**. If the problem persists let the one involved remain in their prison cell. This is better than letting such a pestilence infect all the nuns. It is a great evil ... I would rather the monastery catch fire and burn ... It is something so important ...