

HEROES AND HERETICS:
An 8-Week Course on Early Church History

WEEK 8 **March 6, 2016**
Teacher: **Pastor Pickens**

Augustine – A Theologian by Grace and for Grace

Life:

Augustine was born in northern Africa in Thagaste in Numidia (modern Algeria) in 354 AD on November 13th. Augustine's mother Monica was a devote Christian and tried her best to raise Augustine in the faith. He was catechized as a boy. He had at least one brother (Navigius) and two sisters whose names are not recorded. In particular his mother would pour out fervent and persistent prayers on behalf of her son.

Augustine's father Patricius was not a Christian. His father owned a small amount of land and was a local official in the government. Augustine writes of his mother in very found and high terms. When he writes of his mother's relationship with his father, he does so by admiring how she submitted to him although he did not confess Christianity. His mother prayed for her husband regularly. His father was pagan in a committed way, yet in 370 he came to faith in Christ which was just a year before he died.

Monica's prayers for her son to come to a saving knowledge of the gospel of Jesus Christ went unanswered for years. Augustine recalls the vast amount of tears which his mother shed on behalf of his being dead in sin. Augustine lived a rebellious life as a child. He hated school at an early age and enjoyed seeing games of bear-baiting or seeking out cock fights. Later he'll relate these to the Roman 'games' as a much smaller version of bloodshed.

From 365-369 Augustine studied at Madauros which was about 20 miles from his home (11-16 years old). While there Augustine was trained in the common pagan traditions of the school systems at the time. These pagan traditions were shaping for him at this point. When Augustine was 16 his father ran short on money and Augustine had to return home for a year. During this year Augustine joined with friends in a rebellious lifestyle. He entertained a long and pervasive life of sexual immorality beginning at this point. In particular, an outing with his friends where he stole pears stood out clearly in his mind.

Augustine could get pears of his own. The pears that he stole weren't even good pears. The real joy for Augustine came from the fact that these were stolen pears. Augustine couldn't even remember if he ate any of the pears but he remembered the thrill of stealing these pears was that it was forbidden. "My sole gratification in them was my own sin, which I was pleased to enjoy; for, if any one of these pears entered my mouth, the only good flavor it had was my sin in eating it."¹

As time went on Augustine received a thorough education. It seems as though a man named Romanian took interest in him and funded his education. From 371-374 he studied in Carthage. After his father's death his mother came to live with him in Carthage. While Augustine was in Carthage he lived a particular immoral life. He sought to lay hold of what immediate pleasures he could. In 372 he had an illegitimate son (Adeodatus) through a mistress that he'd taken to himself. Augustine didn't want a child and didn't have another child with this woman. For 15 years Augustine lived with this woman. He wanted the pleasures offered without any of the burdens or responsibilities that can arise as an outcome.

Augustine went from student to instructor and began teaching rhetoric in Thagaste for a year in 375. Romanian also seemed instrumental in providing this teaching opportunity for Augustine. While there he had a Christian friend Amicus who Augustine tried to sway to Manicheism. Augustine had become a Manichean in Carthage. He was making progress and then his friend fell ill and on his deathbed his parents had him baptized. His friend recovered at that point and held fast to Christianity to Augustine's frustration. Afterward Amicus fell sick again and passed away. His death impacted Augustine significantly. Augustine then moved on from there to teach rhetoric in Carthage (376-383).

Augustine went on a long and extensive path in search for truth and beauty. He wandered from one philosophy or religion to another. "[T]he God who made me must be good and all the good in me is his. I thank him

¹ Confessions, 2.6.12

and praise him for all the good in my life, even my life as a boy. But my sin was this, that I looked for pleasure, beauty, and truth not in him but in myself and his other creatures, and the search led me instead to pain, confusion, and error. My God, in whom is my delight, my glory, and my trust, I thank you for your gifts and beg you to preserve and keep them for me. Keep me, too, and so your gifts will grow and reach perfection and I shall be with you myself, for I should not even exist if it were not by your gift.”²

One of his religious pursuits was Manicheism, which was a Gnostic religion. Dualism in mythology and between the physical and spiritual realms was a central tenet of the religion. Manicheism argues that our own actions are determined by powers which are beyond our control. Eventually the strict adherents to Manicheism would live very ascetic lives. Augustine admired such but didn’t want it for himself at this point. For nine years he continued in this religion. While teaching in Carthage, Augustine met a Manichean preacher named Faustus. Augustine was defending Manicheism at this point but growing increasingly dissatisfied with it. He wasn’t satisfied with Manicheism in that it too quickly absolves us of guilt for what we do wrong. Augustine was impressed by Faustus’s preaching ability; however, he found him lacking in his ability to give intellectually satisfying answers. At this point he began to grow in his appreciation for philosophy.

After his bout with Manicheism he went to Rome and spent a year there (383) seeking to reach fulfillment and joy through academic and rational means. His students in Carthage were unruly and he heard that conditions for teaching in Rome were better. He left for Rome without informing his mother. While in Rome he turned to Platonism. Augustine valued rationalism at this point. One tenet of Platonism that Augustine would struggle with is that Platonism argues that we only sin out of ignorance.

In several instances he was very energetic in his support of these views or religions. However, as time went on he again and again found himself disillusioned with them. His famous quote, “Our hearts are restless until the find their rest in Thee,” was both theological and existential for Augustine. The truth of God’s Word and the experience of life proclaimed this truth for Augustine. “I lived in misery, like every man whose soul is tethered by the love of things that cannot last and then is agonized to lose them.”³

In 384 he went to Milan and was appointed imperial rhetorician there. His mistress and son came to live with him in Milan and later his mother and brother would come to live there as well. His mother arranged a marriage for him to progress his social status. This meant that Augustine had to send his mistress back to northern Africa. Augustine had come to love this woman and it hurt him deeply to separate himself from her. For about a year Augustine took to himself another mistress.

It was at this point that Augustine first heard Ambrose preach. Ambrose was a gifted thinker and orator. Another Christian who was even more influential in Augustine’s life at this point was Simplician. He encouraged Augustine to read Paul, would meet with him regularly, and told him accounts of conversions. It was at this point that Augustine found Christianity to give satisfying answers to questions that haunted him. Augustine was drawn to Christianity which was intellectually satisfying and deep as well as consistent in the lifestyle to which it appealed. “[I]t seemed to me all the more right that the authority of Scripture should be respected and accepted with the purest of faith, because while all can read it with ease, it also has a deeper meaning in which its great secrets are locked away. Its plain language and simple style make it accessible to everyone, and yet it absorbs the attention of the learned.”⁴

When his conversion took place it was a very memorable event for Augustine. At the time (386 AD) he was with another friend and teacher Alypius. These two found themselves on a journey toward faith where they were often in the same step of the process. Augustine and Alypius were in a garden in Milan which was on the property where Augustine lived. They were talking about sin and its dreadfulness together. Augustine was visibly distraught because of his anguish over sin. Augustine then distanced himself for a time needing space as he felt his brokenness and bondage in sin. While sitting beneath a fig tree he began lamenting over his own sinful condition. He weeps over the sins that he’s committed and along over his condition as one who is a slave to sin. He realizes that sin is a bondage which he is unable to escape even as he hates it. He declares that there was “the most bitter sorrow” in his heart.

While he’s weeping he hears a child somewhere chanting, “take it and read” over and over again. He’s struck at the moment by a need to read God’s Word. He stands up and goes back to Alypius, to the place where he

² Confessions 1.20.1

³ Confessions 4.6.1

⁴ Confessions, 6.5.2

had earlier put down a copy of Paul's letters. He opens the book and reads from the page to which he opened. After reading Romans 13:13-14 this is what Augustine wrote of his own experience: "I had no wish to read more and no need to do so. For in an instant, as I came to the end of the sentence, it was as though the light of faith flooded into my heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled."⁵

Augustine tells Alypius what has taken place. Alypius takes Romans and reads the next verse and at that moment also comes to faith and the two rejoice together at their new found Christian faith. The two go inside and tell Monica who rejoices exuberantly.

Augustine, wanting to make a break with his former way of life, quit teaching rhetoric after his conversion. He also gave up his mistress and abandoned the prospect of marriage. He went and spent some time in Cassiciacum where a few companions spent their time secluded as Christian philosophers on a friend's estate.

Augustine returned to Milan with his son and Alypius. In the short time since his conversion he wrote four dialogues which explained his journey to faith. He, his son, and Alypius were baptized there in Milan in 387 by Bishop Ambrose. After their baptism they began a journey back to northern Africa. It was during this journey that Monica died. She died in joy at seeing her son and her grandson having come to faith. Augustine and those with him mourned deeply at her passing.

Augustine, his son, and Alypius return to Thagaste in 388. While there Augustine lived a monastic life and engaging in study and writing. A year after they arrived, Augustine's son passed away. In these writings Augustine focused a great deal on apologetics. Later Alypius would be appointed as the Bishop of Thagaste.

In 391 Augustine became a presbyter in Hippo. As a presbyter he would preach regularly and instruct other ministers. Several years later he was appointed Bishop of Hippo in 395. For the rest of his life he ministered faithfully. He preached and taught regularly. He wrote an incredible amount of material, which is still accessible today. Nearly 300 of his letters have been preserved. Additionally, over 400 sermons have been preserved and it is estimated that he preached about 8,000 sermons.⁶ It was shortly after he was appointed bishop that Augustine wrote the *Confessions* (397-398). Luther and Calvin were indebted to Augustine for much of their early thinking. No man up until this point in history so significantly influenced the theology of the church following him.

The *Confessions* come from a man who is a Bishop at the time, yet they show honesty and humility. There is a rawness to the *Confessions* that is similar to that of the Psalms and instructive. They teach us to remain broken at the foot of the cross and to cast ourselves always upon God. "Lord, I cast all my troubles on you and from now on I shall contemplate the wonders of your law (Ps. 119:18). You know how weak I am and how inadequate is my knowledge: teach me and heal my frailty. Your only Son, in whom the whole treasury of wisdom and knowledge is stored up (Col. 2:3), has redeemed me with his blood. Save me from the scorn of my enemies (Ps. 119:122), for the price of my redemption is always in my thoughts."⁷

Augustine knew several controversies in his lifetime. One was with the Donatists. Following the great persecution there were many lapsed Christians who returned to the church. Some of these lapsed Christians would later even be ordained as presbyters. The Donatists argued that lapsed Christians could not return. They significantly honored martyrdom. They also had extremely low tolerance for sin in the Christian community. The Donatists also argued that any sacraments administered by a formerly lapsed Christian were invalid. Over time the Donatists would even grow violent in some of their doctrinal pursuits.

Another controversy was with Pelagianism. Pelagius was a British monk who lived from 360-431 AD. According to Pelagius it requires one's effort to merit God's help. Jesus for him was an example to be followed. In 418 AD the Council of Carthage voted in favor of Augustine's view of salvation by grace and condemned Pelagius's view of salvation by merit. Augustine also identified the shortcomings of the pursuits that he followed prior to Christianity.

Augustine saw the Roman Empire as it was in serious decline. Some would go so far as to blame Christianity for the fall of the Roman Empire. They argued that the fall was due to the abandonment of the old gods. In 410 Rome fell to Alaric and the Goth armies. It was after this that Augustine wrote *The City of God*, which was a sympathetic apologetical work. He highlights the forgiveness and compassion of God. In one instance he writes about women who were raped when Rome was sacked. He says they are not guilty because of sins done

⁵ *Confessions*, 8.12.28

⁶ Wills, xii

⁷ *Confessions*, 10.43.3

against them. As they feel the shame of sin done against them they should look to God for consolation. “The Christian Church outlived the Roman Empire without shedding a single drop of blood, save its own.”

The Vandals came to northern Africa in 428. From 430-431 these armies besieged Hippo. While the city was under siege Augustine died. On the 28th of August in 430 AD Augustine passed away.

Thought:

Augustine would argue for infant baptism. This was closely related to his opposition of the Donatists. The Donatists argued that once a believer lapsed that could not come back. This came to have a wider impact on the church in that the Donatists also argued that any sacraments performed by a returned presbyter who lapsed in the past were invalid. They argued that what made a sacrament effectual was the one administering it (ex opera operantis). Augustine looked to the sacrament itself and said the value was in the sacrament being done according to the word and drew attention to grace in Christ (ex opera operato). It was not dependent upon the one administering it so long as it was done as Christ appointed. All the while Augustine was careful to maintain that the sacraments were given to the church and thus to be performed by those called and ordained. Likewise, the validity and power of preaching was based upon the person of Jesus Christ.

Joy and worship were important themes for Augustine. What’s more, joy and worship were significantly related in Augustine’s thought. “If things of this world delight you, praise God for them but turn your love away from them and give it to their Maker, so that in the things that please you you may not displease him.”⁸ Worship gives joy to the Christian. Joy in God is necessary for true worship. Augustine puts it in perhaps an overly strong way here in that it sounds like we can’t love things other than God, but even our love for others flows from and ought to contribute back to our love for God.

“Can any praise be worthy of the Lord’s majesty? How magnificent is his strength! How inscrutable his wisdom! Man is one of your creatures, Lord, and his instinct is to praise you. He bears about him the mark of death, the sign of his own sin, to remind him that you thwart the proud. But still, since he is part of your creation, he wishes to praise you. The thought of you stirs him so deeply that he cannot be content unless he praises you, because you made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you.”⁹

Later on Augustine writes of God’s greatness and concludes by writing: “You are my God, my Life, my holy Delight, but is this enough to say of you? Can any man say enough when he speaks of you? Yet woe betide those who are silent about you! For even those who are most gifted with speech cannot find words to describe you.”¹⁰

Augustine made significant contributions to the doctrine of the Trinity. The Cappadocian Fathers spoke about the Trinity from primarily a work or existential approach. They spoke about the different works that each member of the Trinity accomplished. Augustine began with a more ontological approach. He focused on the relationships that existed between the members of the Trinity. He looked at the works of God as Trinitarian works but different aspects of those works were accomplished by different members. Augustine argues for the equal power and glory of each member of the Trinity. Only in the accomplishment of redemption is there at times subordination between the members. They are co-equal in essence and only subordinate in economy.

He criticized the rationalism of Manicheism. They pursued a special knowledge. Augustine later declared that we: “Believe in order to understand.” Augustine recognized that a knowledge was given by the Spirit through faith. Truth and faith go together (Titus 1:1-3).

Augustine’s opposition to Pelagius resulted in very thorough and biblical constructions of the doctrine of the fall and the doctrine of grace. Mankind will never work their way to God. Due to sin we find ourselves in a position where a relationship with God is impossible. Nor can we do anything about our sin so as to make that relationship possible. “The evil in me was foul, but I loved it. I loved my own perdition and my own faults, not the things for which I committed wrong, but the wrong itself.”¹¹

If we are to be saved then it must happen by grace. Salvation is always in Jesus Christ and it is an unmerited gift. “It is my faith that calls to you, Lord, the faith which you gave me and made to live in me through the merits of your Son, who became man, and through the ministry of your preacher.”¹²

⁸ Confessions 4.12.1

⁹ Confessions 1.1.1

¹⁰ Confessions 1.4.1

¹¹ Confessions 2.4.2

¹² Confessions 1.1.4

Augustine will go back all the way to predestination in his understanding of the doctrine of grace. There are four conditions that Augustine teaches: 1) before the fall, man is able not to sin; 2) after the fall, man is not able not to sin (able only to sin); 3) after redemption, man is able not to sin; 4) and after Christ's return we will not be able to sin.

"For He says: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life;" that is, by me men come, to me they come, in me they rest. For when we come to Him, we come to the Father also, because through an equal an equal is known; and the Holy Spirit binds, and as it were seals us, so that we are able to rest permanently in the supreme and unchangeable God. And hence we may learn how essential it is that nothing should detain us on the way, when not even our Lord Himself, so far as He has condescended to be our way, is willing to detain us, but wishes us rather to press on; and, instead of weakly clinging to temporal things, even though these have been put on and worn by him for our salvation, to pass over them quickly, and to struggle to attain unto Himself, who has freed our nature from the bondage of temporal things, and has set it down at the right hand of His Father."¹³

Take Away:

We should be careful to recognize the greatness of God's grace and power. As we do so we become those who are quick to pray for ourselves and others. He alone is the one who can transform hearts. He can do it to our own hearts when we feel far from him. He can do it with our own hearts when we doubt that change is possible. "Look on these things with pity, O Lord, and free us who now call upon you from such delusions. Set free also those who have not yet called upon you, so that they may pray to you and you may free them from this folly."¹⁴ Some sins can be so habitual and abiding in our lives that we can come to a place of doubt that change is even possible. However, these doubts should be dispelled when we understand God's grace and power. Change is beyond our own efforts. Change is not beyond God's ability. To think or believe that we must always struggle and fail as we have in the past is inconsistent with the magnitude of God's grace and power that is ours in Christ Jesus.

This should also influence how we pray for others. It can be easy to slip into doubt about the possibility of salvation for certain individuals. We doubt that someone so wayward could ever come to faith, or come back to faith in some instances. Yet God is able to transform even the most corrupt of lives. He is able to bring life where there was only death before. He is able to bring faith out of the most obstinate and heinous of individuals.

The real story of such a great sinner coming to Christ and to be such a devote saint gives us hope for ourselves and for others. This is what God is able to accomplish in someone's life. Life is brought where only death was before (Titus 3:3-7). We have hope that the pains and struggles we feel now are not impossible burdens or obstacles for God to remove.

We should be quick to understand our own sinfulness. When we are truly honest with ourselves we admit that we are so broken that we enjoy sin. We are so twisted that we desire that which is not right. We do need to be enabled and we need to have our desires captured and rearranged. That is only possible in the gospel (Rom. 8:1-11). We are in need of being made new creations, of the old going and the new coming (2 Cor. 5:17).

Every believer ought to be able to write their own version of the *Confessions*. We all have sins to confess. We know intimately what it is to mess up and stumble and fall. We know what it is to feel shame and guilt. However, the Christian also knows, at least in part, what it feels like to have repentance that sings. We know that God sees but also forgives our sin completely in Jesus Christ. Our words might not be so elegant as Augustine's, yet the realities for us are the same and we should long to press into them to such a degree that the experiences are similar as well. "My God, let me be thankful as I remember and acknowledge all your mercies. Let my whole self be steeped in love of you and all my being cry Lord, there is none like you! (Ps. 35:10) You have broken the chains that bound me; I will sacrifice in your honour (Ps. 116:7). I shall tell how it was that you broke them and, when they hear what I have to tell, all who adore you will exclaim, 'Blessed be the Lord in heaven and on earth. Great and wonderful is his name.'"¹⁵

We are those who are influenced by others. This can be a dangerous thing. We can find ourselves influenced into sinful habits. This typically doesn't happen all at once but over the course of time together with others we can become numb to the twisted nature of our behavior. "O friendship all unfriendly! You strange seducer of the soul, who hungers for mischief from impulses of mirth and wantonness, who craves another's loss

¹³ Augustine, On Christian Doctrine, Book I

¹⁴ Confessions, 1.10.1

¹⁵ Confessions, 8.1.1

without any desire for one's own profit or revenge—so that, when they say, "Let's go, let's do it," we are ashamed not to be shameless."¹⁶ Yet influence can also be a beneficial thing. Together we grow up into him who is the head (Eph. 4:15-16). We can be used to sharpen each other in life (Prov. 27:17).

God's Word is living and active (Heb. 4:12). We can often think that we need something more than God's Word to teach or bring us to a certain understanding. We can often think that God's Word isn't the most appropriate thing in evangelism. However, God uses his Word. He really does speak to us and transform hearts and lives through his Word. We should be quick to memorize, meditate upon it, encourage others by it, and appeal to it as we evangelize to others.

The Christian life is a life of joy. We rejoice in God. We trace the beauties of this world and life back to their Giver. However, so long as this world is broken in sin there will be many griefs and miseries to be endured.

We should keep in mind that for many, conversion to Christianity is a 'train-wreck' experience. There is something that we give up in coming to Christ. We abandon ourselves and our own pursuits of finding life. We gain Christ and that is better, but it does often come at a felt cost. We give up a way of life and pleasures that are enjoyed apart from and against God's will. However, we come to a place where guilt is forgiven and shame covered. Those who have significant shame in their past have hope of freedom only in the power of the gospel. In Christ we are new. Our past is not what defines us, but rather his innocence. We can dive into the full weight of our shame, acknowledge its truth, and yet not be identified with it.

Even the early controversy with Pelagius reveals a continued debate today. There can be fear in proclaiming a gospel of grace that people will go on to sin boldly. Paul himself was familiar with similar reasoning (Rom. 6:1-4). People may give up on moral improvement. People rush to antinomianism. The gospel of grace teaches us that we can now work because God works. Our striving is dependent upon grace. Grace enables us for obedience to the law and true and hope striving after moral improvement.

For Further Reading:

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¹⁶ Confessions, 2.9.17