



A LIFE WORTHY OF THE GOSPEL

Lesson 3 – Augustine: Ordering Our Loves

Dear friends:

In this week's session we will turn to one of the great minds in the history of the church, the 4th century North African bishop Augustine. He stands at a great crossroad in Western history, the turn from classical Greek and Roman civilization toward the birth of Christendom. He is born into a world that can remember no other order than the Roman Empire, yet he lives to see that colossus stumble and fall. In the midst of these momentous turns, Augustine gives face and voice to the human struggle to know and follow the truth, and to sustain courage and faith in the midst of disaster. Sixteen centuries later, we are still wrestling with the problems he raises and learning from the solutions he offers.

In his many writings, Augustine deals with fundamental questions ranging from the nature of time to the basis of human knowledge. Finally he caps his career with a work aimed to give a theological account of history and how God is at work in it to bring creation to its culmination. We, however, will focus on matters closer to home, on the problem that preoccupied him in his youth, and in his most famous writing, the autobiographical *Confessions*. This is the mystery of the human being.

Why do we behave as we do, and what moves us to action? What is the nature of human freedom, and what continually thwarts it, so that we can see what is good but not do it? What is at the heart of moral life? What is sin? Where is the path from captivity to genuine liberty, and what can set us free to know and love the Truth that is God? With all these things Augustine wrestles, and in him we find the classic answer of Christian tradition: God himself must be the source and giver of freedom. God alone must lead us on, drawing and winning us, setting before us the path that leads to life and closing off the paths that lead to destruction, awakening in us the love that can lead us home. As God alone is wholly and perfectly free, God must restore us to freedom, a freedom that is identical with serving God.

Augustine's account of Christian moral life has some of the same paradoxical character we saw in the New Testament. It is at the same time rigorous and demanding, with an insistence on the purity that fits us for the companionship of a holy God, and gracious, an invitation to rest and delight in God's overflowing goodness. At the heart of his picture is the idea of our learning to love rightly, to love all things "in God," who is their source. I hope this week's study will serve to bring this great ancient thinker to life for you.

Sincerely,

Sondra