

Module 110: Augustine

St Aurelius Augustine *Sermon on 1 John 4:4-12*. Abridged, modernized and introduced by Stephen Tomkins. Edited and prepared for the web by Dan Graves.

“Love and do what you will.”

Module Introduction

Augustine lived from 354-430 and was indisputably the most important theologian in the first millennium of the western church. He shaped the Western Church’s thinking on salvation, the church, baptism, sin, the Trinity, the Christian state, sex - in short, almost everything.

He was a north African, like Tertullian, and the Bishop of Hippo, in Numidia (modern Algeria) from 391 until his death. He fought two great theological (and political) battles as Bishop. One was against Pelagius, a Briton who taught that anyone can achieve salvation by choosing to live a good enough life, while Augustine insisted that we can only be saved if God chooses us and puts his love in our hearts.

The other, earlier controversy was against the Donatists. These were a north African church who had parted ways with the international Catholic Church early in the fourth century, insisting on stricter standards. The majority of African Christians were Donatists, but Augustine was extremely successful in winning them over to the Catholic Church. He printed leaflets, preached sermons and wrote songs against them, and when none of that worked, he encouraged the Imperial forces to use fines and imprisonment to force the Donatists to convert, which worked very well. This sermon comes from a series covering the whole of 1 John, and is on the theme of love. Love is a central Christian theme that transcends history and should be preached on today as well as 1600 years ago, but Augustine’s take on it comes from the years of his anti-Donatist campaign, and is very much tied up with his policy of “tough love” towards them - using violent means for the sake of their salvation. The church ran with his theory throughout the Middle Ages.

6. ...All who do not love God are strangers and antichrists.

They might come to the churches, but they cannot be numbered among the children of God. That fountain of life does not belong to them. A bad person can have baptism and prophecy. King Saul had prophecy: even while he persecuted the holy David, he was filled with the Spirit of Prophecy, and began to prophesy. [1 Sam. 19] A bad person can receive the sacrament of the body and blood of the Lord, for is said, "All who eat and drink unworthily, eat and drink judgment on themselves." [1 Cor. 11:29] A bad person can have the name of Christ and be called a Christian. Such people are referred to when it says, "They polluted the name of their God." [Ezek. 36:20] To have all these sacraments is, as I say, possible even for a bad person. But to have love and be a bad person is impossible. Love is the unique gift, the fountain that is yours alone. The Spirit of God exhorts you to drink from it, and in so doing to drink from himself.

7. "This is how the love of God is shown among us." The reason why the writer exhorts us, is so that we may come to love God. Could we love him, unless he first loved us? Though we were slow to love, let us not be slow to love in return. He loved us first. We do not even love in the same way as he. He loved the unrighteous, but he took away the unrighteousness. He loved the sick, but he visited them to make them whole. Love, then, is God. "This is how the love of God is shown among us: God sent his only Son into the world, that we may live through him." As the Lord himself said: "No one can have greater love than this: to lay his down his life for his friends." [John 25:13] This proved Christ's love for us, the fact that he died for us. How is the Father's love for us proved? By the fact that he sent his only Son to die for us. As the apostle Paul says, "He who did not spare his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how will he not freely give us all things?" [Rom. 8:32] Notice how the Father delivered up Christ, and so did Judas. Does it not seem that they did the same sort of thing? ... There was a delivering up by the Father; a delivering up [of himself] by

the Son, and a delivering up by Judas. The thing done is the same, but what is it that sets their actions apart? This: the Father and the Son did it in love, but Judas did it in betrayal. So you see that we need to consider not what a person does but with what mind and will he does it. Why do we bless the Father and detest Judas for doing the same deed? We bless love and detest wickedness. ...

8. What I have said so far applies to actions that are similar. When they are different, we find people made fierce by love; and by wickedness made seductively gentle. A father beats a boy, while a kidnapper caresses him. Offered a choice between blows and caresses, who would not choose the caresses and avoid the blows? But when you consider the people who give them you realize that it is love that beats, wickedness that caresses. This is what I insist upon: human actions can only be understood by their root in love. All kinds of actions might appear good without proceeding from the root of love. Remember, thorns also have flowers: some actions seem truly savage, but are done for the sake of discipline motivated by love. Once and for all, I give you this one short command: love, and do what you will. If you hold your peace, hold your peace out of love. If you cry out, cry out in love. If you correct someone, correct them out of love. If you spare them, spare them out of love. Let the root of love be in you: nothing can spring from it but good. ...

10. "No one has ever seen God." He is invisible, and must be looked for not with the eye but with the heart. But just as if we wished to see the sun, we should purge our eyes, wishing to see God, let us purge the eye by which God can be seen. Where is this eye? Hear the Gospel: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." [Matt. 5:8] But do not imagine God according to the lust of your eyes. If you do, you will create for yourself a huge form or an incalculable magnitude which (like the light which you see with your bodily eyes) extends in every direction. Your imagination lets it fill realm after realm of space, all the

vastness you can conceive of. Or maybe you picture for yourself a venerable-looking old man. Do not imagine any of these things. If you would see God, here is what you should imagine: God is love. What sort of face does love have? What shape is it? What size? What hands and feet does it have? No one can say. And yet it does have feet, those feet that carry people to church. It does have hands, those hands that reach out to the poor. It has eyes, those through which we consider the needy: "blessed is the person," it is said, "who considers the needy and the poor." [Ps. 41:1] It has ears, of which the Lord says, "He that has ears to hear let him hear." [Luke 8:8]

These parts of the body are not separated by different places: anyone with love sees the whole at once. Inhabit, and you shall be inhabited. Dwell, and you shall be dwelt in. After all, who loves what he cannot see, my brothers? But why then do you call out "Amen!" to my praises of love? What have I shown you? Have I produced a gleam of colors? Have I been talking about something made from gold and silver? Have I dug out jewels from hidden treasure? Have I shown anything like this to your eyes? Is my face changed while I speak? No, you and I alike are in the same forms as before. But love is praised, and you shout and applaud. Certainly you do not see anything. But as it pleases you to praise love, so let it please you to keep it in your heart. Pay attention to what I say brothers. I urge you on, as God enables me, towards a great treasure. If you were shown a beautiful little vase, inlaid with gold, and it charmed your eyes and drew the eager desire of your heart, would you not all say, "If only I had that vase!" And it would be pointless for you to say it, because it would not be in your power to possess it - although someone who wants to have it might think of stealing it from another's house. Love is praised to you. If it pleases you, have it, possess it. There is no need to rob anyone, no need to buy it. It is free. Take it, clasp it. There is nothing sweeter. If this is what it is like merely to talk about it, what must it be like when one has it?

11. If any of you should wish to act out of love, brothers, do not imagine it to be a self-abasing, passive and timid thing. And do not think that love can be preserved by a sort of gentleness - or rather tame listlessness. This is not how it is preserved. Do not imagine that you love your servant when you refrain from beating him, or that you love your son when you do not discipline him, or that you love your neighbor when you do not rebuke him. This is not love, it is feebleness. Love should be fervent to correct. Take delight in good behavior, but amend what is bad. Love the person, but not the error in the person: God made the person, but the person alone made the error. Love what God made, not what the person made. If you love one thing, you remove another. When you esteem one thing, you change another. But if you are severe, let it be out of love, for the sake of correction. This is why love was represented by the dove which descended upon the Lord. [Matt. 3:16] Why did the Holy Spirit, who pours love into us, take the form of a dove? The dove has no bitterness, yet she fights with beak and wings for her young; hers is a fierceness without bitterness. In the same way, when a father chastises his son he does so for discipline. As I said earlier, the kidnapper inveigles the child with bitter endearments, in order to sell him; a father, for the sake of correction, chastises without bitterness.

This is how you should act to all people. Let this be a great lesson for you, brothers, a great rule. You all have children, or wish to have - or if you have decided for certain to have no children, at least spiritually you want to have children. Well, what father does not correct his son? What son does not respect his father's discipline? And yet he seems to be fierce with him. It is the fierceness of love, a fierceness without bitterness, in the way of the dove, not of the raven. From this it occurs to me, my brothers, to tell you who the violators of love are: they are the ones who have split away from the Church [i.e. the Donatists]. As they hate love itself, so they hate the dove too. But the dove convicts them: it comes from heaven, the heavens open, and it rests on the

head of the Lord. Why? That John may hear, "This is he that baptizes." [John 1:33] Away from here, robbers! Away, you who invade of the possession of Christ! You have dared to ascribe to your own things the ownership of God - although you insist on being lords there. He recognizes and rules over his own possession; he does not cancel the deeds, but enters in and takes charge. When any come to the Catholic Church, their baptism is not cancelled, so that the ownership of the Commander is not cancelled. What is done in the Catholic Church? The Owner is acknowledged and enters in under his own title. But the robber was enters in under a title that does not belong to him.

Discussion Starters

1. What is so important about love to make it the central and essential Christian virtue?
2. "Love, then, is God." What does this mean?
3. What do you think Augustine's opinion would be of Christians who do not act out of love? What about non-Christians who do?
4. What is the point of Augustine's comparison between Christ, God the Father, and Judas?
5. "Let the root of love be in you: nothing can spring from it but good." Does this mean that if you have good intentions you can do no wrong? If so, do you agree? If not, what does it mean?
6. What advice does Augustine give to those who are tempted to visualize God? Why? Do you think it is good advice? Who or what does Scripture describe as "the express image of God"? How does the love of the "Express Image" compare to Augustine's portrayal of love?
7. Why does Augustine say that love is not gentle? Do you

agree? Does Augustine's portrait of love compare favorably with the attributes of love described in 1 Corinthians 13?

8. Do you think that Augustine's teaching about love is reflected in his attitude and treatment of the Donatists? Would you agree with him that the punishment of heretics is more loving than to let them continue in error? Who decides what is heresy and how severely to punish it? What if the people who have the authority to punish heresy go bad?

9. Do you think we today have something to learn from Augustine's teaching on love?

Bible Verses

1 John 4:7-21

John 13:31-35

Proverbs 3:11-14, 13:24, 23:12-16