

Augustine and Pelagian Controversy

This lesson is entitled “God Himself is our Power: Saint Augustine and the Pelagian Controversy.” In the last lesson I read from a letter that Augustine wrote to a widow named Proba. It was a letter Augustine wrote in response to some questions she had about prayer. He answered her in considerable detail, telling her how to pray. I will read another section from that letter now, before I use one of Augustine’s prayers to begin the lecture. Augustine writes, “This being so, to allow yourself a great deal of time for prayer is neither wrong nor unprofitable, if you are not hindered by other responsibilities involving good and necessary activity. But even during these, we ought, as I have said, always to be praying by our desire. To pray long is not, as some people think, to pray with much speaking. Many words are one thing. A prolonged disposition to prayer is another.”

With those words in mind about prayer, let us pray to God using one of Augustine’s prayers. *“O God, You are the light of the minds that know You, the life of the souls that love You, and the strength of the wills that serve You. Help us so to know You that we may truly love You, so to love You that we may fully serve You, whom to serve is perfect freedom, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”*

The topic of today’s lesson will finally bring us to a discussion of the doctrine of grace. I have mentioned a number of times in previous lessons that we do not find much emphasis on the doctrine of grace prior to Augustine. It is certainly present in the Bible, and particularly in Paul. But as we read the church fathers, except for some glimmers in Tertullian and some of the others, there is not a strong and concerted emphasis on grace. F. F. Bruce, in his book *The Spreading Flame*, says, “The biblical doctrine of grace seems almost to go underground in the post-apostolic age, to reappear only with Augustine.” I used to think that statement was an exaggeration, but I have been testing it now for many years. Unfortunately, I think F. F. Bruce is right. B. B. Warfield says, “There is no other such gulf in the history of human thought as that which is cleft between the apostolic and the immediately succeeding ages.” You might think that the message of grace would be so clear to people from the Bible, and particularly from the writings of Paul, that the early church would pick it up from there and continue to stress it as Paul did.

Augustine was not the first person in the post-apostolic period to believe in the doctrine of grace. Many people, those who came to the Lord for salvation, believed in grace. They believed that they were sinners. They believed that they needed God’s help in order to be saved. And they believed that as God’s people it was important and necessary for them to live good, holy, and godly lives. B. B. Warfield said, “No doubt the essence of evangelical religion remained the implicit possession of every truly Christian heart.” We find it difficult to think of people being saved without some understanding of what it meant to be saved by grace. But in those early centuries, despite the fact that this was not a prominent theme among the church fathers, the understanding of salvation by grace was present in the lives and hearts of people who came to the Lord.

It is a situation similar to that of the doctrine of the Trinity before Nicea and the doctrine of the two natures of Christ before Chalcedon. People believed in the Trinity, but they did not have the words to express their faith properly. And they believed in the two natures—Jesus is both God and man—but they could not find a good way to say that. The church would eventually struggle with those important doctrines and come up with formulas that could be used to express biblical teaching on the Trinity and the two natures of Christ. The same thing is going on with the doctrine of grace. People believed in grace, knew about grace, and they were being saved by grace, but they did not know clearly how to express their belief in grace. They placed a great deal of emphasis on good works. I would not say they

placed too much emphasis on good works, because it is impossible to place too much emphasis on good works. In their emphasis on good works, however, there was a kind of imbalance as they failed to understand fully how to express the doctrine of grace and relate the doctrine to the Christian life.

I can illustrate the situation by quoting one of the church fathers prior to Augustine. He is someone I highly respect, John Chrysostom, the great preacher of Constantinople. He was the greatest exegete in the history of the early church. Chrysostom said this about grace: "All depends indeed on God, but not so that our free will is hindered. God does not anticipate our choice, lest our free will should be outraged, but when we have chosen, then great is the assistance he brings to us." That was a common way to explain grace in the church prior to Augustine. God was described as our helper. We do what we can, and we can use our free wills to turn to God, and then God turns to us and helps us with our salvation so that we can become Christians with God's help. Augustine said no, God is our power, not our helper. We can do nothing. He must give us everything because we lack everything.

That brings us to Augustine and grace. While Augustine was not the first person in the post-apostolic era to believe in grace, he was one of the first to clearly teach it. And he learned much of his thinking on grace from Ambrose. Augustine gave Ambrose credit, and Ambrose deserves our thanks for moving Augustine further along the line, which Augustine would follow through his career as the doctor, or theologian, of grace. Like Esther in the Old Testament, Augustine was raised up for such a time as this. God providentially prepared him and set the stage for Augustine to be able to express in such memorable ways the biblical teaching of grace.

Augustine's own experience led him to his ideas. He was a born-again man. After struggling a long time, not being able to find the answers or peace that he desired in his own life and heart, God finally miraculously brought him to Himself. To many people, then as well as now, the religious life was the toilsome search for God. Augustine as a young man certainly experienced that as he went through his various stages of search for God or for inner peace. As Augustine came to realize, however, God is really the seeker, rather than the sought. From his own experience, Augustine knew that God takes the initiative. Augustine would fully have understood Francis Thompson's story of his flight from the Hound of Heaven, as Augustine had that same flight, from Tagasta to Carthage to Rome to Milan. Finally he was captured in the garden in Milan. Augustine's experience of coming into the Christian faith, being sought after by God and captured by God, his born-again experience, prepared him in his own life for his teaching on the doctrine of grace. He was not a man who could see his life as a good one getting better and better. It was a life in rebellion against God until God found him and turned him around and made him His own son.

Along with his experience comes Augustine's study of the Scriptures. What he found in his own heart, that he was a sinner—as he tells us in his *Confessions*, from his very first day he was sinning, and as far as he knew he was sinning before he was born—he found that same idea in the Bible. Then he discovered that he could not do anything about his sin. First of all, he did not want to, and then he could not. "Give me chastity," he said, "But not yet." He realized that he was captured by that sin, and he could not break with it. Then he found that idea in the Bible, too. We are unable to change our sinful condition. Then he found in the Bible what he could not find in the Neo-Platonic philosophers. He found that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners. Then he eventually found in the Bible that God saves us by faith, and that faith is itself a gift of God. We believe the good news and accept God's gift of salvation, and that belief itself is God's gift. Then he came to find in the Bible that if God provides the faith for us to believe, then He had in His great mercy from all eternity planned to give us that faith and bring us into His family.

Along with his experiences and his lifelong study of the Bible, especially the epistles of Paul, there was something else important for Augustine to focus on this issue of grace and bring his mind to bear upon it. It was his clash with Pelagius. Pelagius had come to Rome from the British Isles. We are not sure if he was from Ireland, Wales, or Britain. We are not sure if he was a layman or a monk. We really do not know much about him. He has been called a “respectable gentleman.” When he arrived in Rome, he set out to work with the urban poor and the dockworkers. He wanted to teach them and enable them to live good Christian lives. Pelagius soon received two great shocks. First, the people who claimed to be Christians certainly did not behave like Christians. Their low level of Christian life shocked him. They were church members, but they were not living good Christian lives. Then before he could get over that problem, he was shocked by something else, which was Augustine’s *Confessions*. He read such statements of Augustine as “Give me the grace to do as You command, and then command me to do what You will.” Pelagius could not believe what he was reading. He thought that if you start telling people that they cannot do what God commands until God gives them the grace and strength to obey then people will not obey. It will be an excuse for passivity. People will think that they cannot do anything without God anyway, so they will not do anything. Pelagius felt that it was a very bad teaching. He set out to teach a doctrine that would challenge people to live good lives. He would tell them that they could indeed do it if only they would.

I can summarize Pelagius’ teaching in three points. First of all, he said that everyone born into this world is born neutral. We are not born sinners. We become sinners because we choose to sin, not because we are born sinners. Our wills can go either way. We can choose to do good or we can choose to do evil. He said that practically everybody chooses to do evil, but the reason they do that is that there are so many bad examples around. We look at other people and see them doing evil so we follow their examples. But it is not necessary for us to do evil. We actually can do good. Thus the second point is that we have the possibility within us to do good or bad. He called this free will, and sometimes he called it the grace of free will. That was partly because Augustine and others criticized him for not talking about grace very much. So he started talking about grace, but his meaning of grace was quite different from what Augustine meant by it. Grace, according to Pelagius, was the gift to give us this wonderful free will to enable us to do whatever we choose to do. There were some other gifts for Pelagius, too, including the gift of Scripture, with its commands, and some examples of good lives on the parts of saints and holy people. Those were all helps to enable us to make good choices. Augustine described Pelagius’ view of God’s grace, if we can call it that, by saying that all of this grace does not enable us to will or act, but it helps us to the possibility of willing or acting. Adam’s sin did not affect us except by setting a bad example. Nobody’s sin affects us, for we are free agents, able to choose to do what we want to do. Pelagius said, therefore, in his Bible teaching in Rome to the people who claimed to be Christian but lived very worldly lives, goodness is possible. Even perfection is possible. If you choose to do so, you can live not only a good life, but also a perfect life.

That was the gospel according to Pelagius. F. F. Bruce said that Pelagius was the spiritual father of all those who profess the popular English creed of justification by decency. That is not only an English creed but also an American creed and a creed all over the world. Many people believe that if they only do enough good things then they will get to heaven. So they try to do those good things. I remember hearing a story about a man preaching to some poor, homeless people, people without much hope in this world. The preacher used some lines from Rudyard Kipling’s poem, “If”: “If you can fill the unforgiving minute with sixty seconds worth of work, well done, you will be a man my son. And if you can keep your head when all around you are losing theirs and blaming it on you, you will be a man my son.” And the poem continues with more suggestions for how we ought to live good lives. That is a Pelagian message. As the preacher continues to quote the poem, he is finally interrupted by a voice from a man in

the back of the room, “But what if I cannot?” That is the Augustinian response, at least part of it. We cannot.

Augustine set forth his own teaching, based partly on his own experience, but primarily on his reading of Scripture. He said we cannot do what Pelagius said we can do. We are both unable and unwilling to do good. How did we get this way? Adam was created perfect, but Adam sinned and lost the freedom of his will. Augustine would always say that Adam could choose. In one sense, he had free will. But he could only choose what he now wanted to do, which was to do evil. So free will is still there in one sense, but it is a will enslaved to evil. It is not free now to do either good or evil, because it does not want to do good. Adam was created perfect, but by sinning he lost the freedom of his will to do good, and that all got passed down to us. As the children of Adam we are born corrupt. We inherit his guilt and his corruption, which is called original sin.

Augustine is not quite sure how that works. It was possibly through a representative idea, that Adam was viewed by God as standing for the whole race and so God treats the race as He treated Adam, who sinned for us. Or it was possibly a kind of realism, in which we are implicitly in Adam as he is the biological head of the race. He is the root and we are the branch from that root. Augustine sets forth both views, as Calvin does, and he does decide on one view or the other, although Calvin leans more toward the federal headship view. In some way, Adam’s sin is passed down to us. So we are not born neutral. We are born sinners. This world does not start over every time a baby is born. It just goes on. So we are born sinners and therefore we sin.

That seems like bleak news to this point, but Augustine goes on to say that we do have God’s grace, therefore God’s grace is necessary. He puts it this way in one of his writings called *On Admonition and Grace*, “The grace of God, through Jesus Christ our Lord, must be understood as that by which alone we are delivered from evil, and without which we do absolutely no good things.” So God’s grace is not there just to help us. It is there to save us. Without God’s grace, we could not believe or do anything good. We could not take one step toward God.

We get God’s grace by God giving it to us. Augustine never tired of talking about the fact that grace is *gratis*, which means grace is “free.” Grace is a gift. It is not by works, so we cannot boast. And God gives it out of His sheer mercy. It is not because He sees anything in us to deserve it, nor is it because He foresees anything in us. God does not see that we will believe and then give us His grace in response to our foreseen faith. Foreknowledge, according to Augustine, is God’s foreknowledge of what He is going to do, not foreknowledge of what we are going to do. We cannot do anything worthy of merit anyway, so we are not going to do anything. Augustine further says that God does not give this grace to everybody. He gives it to some people and does not give it to others. We do not know why He only gives it to some and not to others. One of the most incisive, clear, short statements of this comes from the book *Descent of the Dove*, by Charles Williams, who wrote, “God, as it were, determined and predestinated Himself to do good in certain lives. This is His grace. And what of the lives in which He does not determine and predestinate Himself to do good? Well, He does not. Those lives then are lost? Well, yes. God saves whom He chooses and the rest are lost.” Then Williams quotes a statement from Augustine: “[God’s] equity, God’s justice, is so secret that it is beyond the reach of all human understanding.” God’s wisdom, equity, justice, and acts, are all so secret that they are beyond the reach of all human understanding. Then Charles Williams adds, “It is of the highest importance to realize that in that sentence Augustine, from the bottom of his heart, meant ‘equity,’ ‘justice,’ and he meant ‘beyond human understanding.’”

Does all of this mean that, since God gives us the gift of grace and predestines those who receive it by faith, we can then do whatever we want to do? That was the argument of Pelagius. He said such ideas would be the end of exhortation to Christian living, to godliness. If God does it all, then there is no point in us trying to do anything. Augustine said no, because Christian conduct is rooted in a lifelong response of love for God and obedience to His will as thanksgiving and gratitude for His grace. There is growth in grace. It is often slow, with many painful setbacks. But a Christian grows in grace, and must grow in grace. A true Christian will grow in grace.

Pelagius had the view that the church should be like a big monastery, full of super-Christians, all of whom are living perfect or almost perfect lives. If we only chose to do that, then we could. Augustine said no, the church is more like a hospital. All of us are sick, and some of us are seriously sick and injured, but we are all getting better, slowly, even painfully. Complete perfection will come only in heaven.

The church responded to Augustine's teaching. Remember, this kind of teaching had not been heard before, at least, not the way Augustine set it forth with the power and clarity that he expressed in his writings and sermons on grace. Officially, the church accepted it, at least in several church councils, including the Synod of Carthage in North Africa in 418. That council condemned Pelagianism. The third ecumenical council in Ephesus in 431, which was centered on the Christological debates, condemned a variety of Pelagianism that was relevant to that council, because it was particularly centered in the East.

Despite these early official stamps of approval for Augustine's teaching, there was soon after a significant revolt against what he was saying. It even started in his lifetime. The latter part of his life was taken up with a very bitter struggle to some opponents to his doctrine of grace. The revolt came primarily from the monasteries for two reasons. One line of opposition came from traditional theology. Augustine's teaching seemed new, because people were not used to hearing it. Ambrose was teaching it, but he was one among many. John Chrysostom was not teaching it, and most of the church fathers did not teach it, at least not very consistently or clearly. So it seemed like something that was different and new, and the traditional church was not ready to embrace something so new. It was in the context of this controversy that we have the famous statement by Vincent of Lerins, in Gaul: "Catholic doctrine is what is taught always, and everywhere, and by everybody." Augustine's doctrine of grace did not seem to fit those categories. Actually, not much else did either, but that did not seem to bother Vincent too much. But the fact that Augustine's teaching came to the church seeming like something new was startling, and it was a problem. People had to come to realize that the teaching was actually something old. The church had merely lost sight of it for a while, as the church can in various places in church history. We will see the same thing during the time of the Reformation. They said that the Catholic Church had the old faith and the Protestant church had some kind of new faith. That is why Bullinger in Zurich wrote a book called *The Old Faith*, in which he traced Protestantism back to Genesis 3:15 in the Garden of Eden, and he said that Adam and Eve were the first Protestants. So the same problem faced by the Reformers had been faced in the aftermath of the writings of Augustine on grace.

There was another part of the revolt in the monasteries, which was from ascetic Catholicism. After all, the people in the monasteries were there because they thought that by being there they could earn credit toward their salvation. That salvation became more prevalent as time went on, especially during the medieval period, but it was already present in the time of Augustine. But Augustine's teaching destroyed the meritorious nature of good works. Those in the monasteries had to ask, if Augustine was right, why were they living that way in order to earn God's favor and blessing? That was hard for the monks to take. Some of Augustine's most bitter opponents are from the monasteries. They objected to Augustine's teaching on grace.

We can glance ahead to grace after Augustine. I mentioned that before Augustine there was some teaching on grace, but not very much clear expression of the doctrine of grace. Then when Augustine began teaching, his name became closely connected with the doctrine of grace. The church after Augustine did approve Augustinianism in the councils held at Carthage and Ephesus. The monasteries revolted and then the church struggled for a long time over the issue. Then in a very important council, the Synod of Orange, in 529, 100 years after Augustine's death, Augustinianism was embraced, almost, in the Western church. But it was not fully embraced. The Synod of Orange left the door open for some kind of compromise. That compromise is what we call semi-Pelagianism, or perhaps we should call it semi-Augustinianism, but it is semi-something. It did not advocate either pure Pelagianism or pure Augustinianism. I will cover that in more detail in a later lesson. There would be some outstanding voices raised in opposition to semi-Pelagianism, such as Gottschalck and Thomas Bradwardine, but not many. Most of the flow of theology after the Council of Orange, until the Reformation, would be a compromise between Pelagianism and Augustinianism. The teaching was that God saves us, but He does not do it without our help. It is what I call "percentage theology." You do your part and God does His. He may do 99%, but if you do not do your 1% you will be lost. There were different ways the medieval church tried to put together the percentages. I will talk more about that as our course moves on.

The Reformation was a great revival of Augustinianism. Luther's *Bondage of the Will* draws heavily on Augustine. Calvin's *Institutes* relies heavily on Augustine. At one point Calvin exalted, "Augustine is totally ours." He was quoting Augustine so much that he felt that Augustine was on the side of the Protestants. On the issue of grace he was. But there is another side to Augustine that I will talk about in the next lecture, regarding his doctrine of the church, and there it is not so clear that Augustine was on the Protestant side. That is why B. B. Warfield said the Reformation is really Augustine versus Augustine, the Catholic Augustine versus the Protestant Augustine.

After the Reformation there is a slow but steady slide away from Augustinianism into the confusion of modern Christianity, much of which is either Pelagian, semi-Pelagian, or at least semi-Augustinian. Thank God, however, that the message of grace is still heard. And we pray that there might be in our time a great revival of the biblical doctrine of grace so that people far and wide will hear it. "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of our God will stand forever" (Isaiah 40:8).

Upon hearing all of this, many people often wonder how people in the early church could become Christians without understanding the doctrine of grace. We are not saved by being able to quote the catechism. We are saved by God's grace. Our understanding of God's grace, and even Augustine's understanding of God's grace, is not complete and perfect. So people can be saved with some very wrong ideas. There are some basic ideas that have to be understood. There is a God. I am a sinner. And God is a Savior. God has sent Christ as a Redeemer for me. At least that much can be understood. But a person can be saved upon hearing and believing just that small summary of the Gospel, and then spend the rest of his or her life understanding what that means.

The same thing is true for Catholics, Presbyterians, Baptists, or anybody today. If people respond to that much of the Gospel, then there is salvation, regardless of the false teaching that we hear in different churches. The Lord can work in very faulty and imperfect situations, with very limited understandings. When I say that nobody was teaching about grace before Augustine, I do not want you to think that nobody was saved for 300 years. B. B. Warfield has said that we can piece together a mosaic of different teachings from the church fathers, pulling out a little from here or there and ignoring some other things, and from that we can get to the truth. But with Augustine it comes together in one person at one time with great clarity. As I said earlier, people in the first years of the church believed in the deity of Jesus,

and they also believed that there was only one God. So they were trinitarian before the word was invented. They believed that the Holy Spirit was God, but they did not know how to say such things or express them clearly. They had never heard of *homoousios*, but they could still believe in a simple way. We need to have a view in church history that God works in very imperfect situations. At the same time we should give God great thanks and praise for the accomplishments that came to help us know more and see more deeply into the teachings of the Scripture.