

## AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, SEVENTH DISCOURSE ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

*The bishop of Hippo (in modern Algeria), Saint Augustine (354-430) shaped the theology and philosophy of Christianity on the brink of the end of the Roman Empire. Originally a "heretical" Manichee, Augustine experienced a personal conversion and entered into study with Saint Ambrose (ca. 330-397). Augustine's major works include City of God, a treatise on the eternal world beyond earth, and the autobiographical Confessions. Although he wrote many memorable texts on large, definitive issues—from the doctrine of original sin to the just war theory—Augustine also devoted himself to pastoral care. This sermon, preached to his congregation while a pagan festival temptingly occurred outside the church, reveals a more personal side of Augustine's understanding of man's relationship to God.*

No one has ever seen God. Yet, if we love one another, God remains in us, and his love is brought to perfection in us. This is how we know that we remain in him and he in us, that he has given us of his Spirit. Moreover, we have seen and testify that the Father sent his Son as savior of the world. Whoever acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God remains in him and he in God. We have come to know and to believe in the love God has for us. God is love, and whoever remains in love remains in God and God in him.

Love is a sweet word, but sweeter still is the deed. We cannot always speak of it, for we have so many things to do, and our daily business pulls us in different directions. It's not that we don't have anything better to talk about—we just don't have the time to sit around and talk about love. But although we cannot always talk about it, we may always be loving. Just as with the "Alleluia" that we sing daily this time of year— are we, in fact, always singing it? Of course not. We don't sing "Alleluia" for an hour, by which I mean not only that we don't sing it for an entire.

"Alleluia," as you know, means "Praise the Lord." The person who praises God aloud cannot always be doing it, but the one who praises God by the way he lives his life can do so always. Acts of mercy and love, the holiness of piety, chastity, and sobriety—all these are things we can practice all the time, in public or at home, with others or alone in our rooms, while conversing or keeping quiet, when busy or at leisure. And we should practice them always because all of these are internal virtues ...

Dear brothers, you heard earlier in the Gospel reading (at least if you were listening not only with your ears but with your heart), "Take care not to perform righteous deeds in order that people may see them." [Matt 6.1] Now, did Jesus mean by this that we should hide the good things we do from the eyes of others out of fear of being seen? But if we fear spectators, then we will never have imitators—and so we ought to be seen doing good, but we should not do good in order to be seen doing it .... Do good not to win praise for yourself but for the God who has given you the ability to do good... I tell you, my brothers, and in fact, I would not let this go unsaid: Take up good works whenever you can, regardless of the season, the day, and the hour.

... What you can, when you can. . . . Let your charity never cease or be interrupted. Love always, in every season. As it is written, "Let mutual love continue." [Heb 13.1]  
Some of you have probably been wondering, while I've been talking about this epistle of St. John, why it is "brotherly " love he emphasizes so much...

He speaks over and over again of this love-and yet he seldom mentions the love we should have for God. (He does mention love for God, of course.) Similarly, he says hardly a word about loving our enemies. He extols and preaches charity with the greatest energy but tells us only to love one another rather than to love our enemies. But we just heard, in our Gospel reading, "For if you love those who love you, what recompense will you have? Do not the tax collectors do the same?" [Matt 5.46] .... Love is like fire: it touches first what is nearest before extending to what is further away. A beloved person is closer to you than a stranger, and a benign stranger is closer to you than a sworn enemy. So give your love to those who are closest to you ... then extend it to strangers who have done you no ill, and then extend it again to your enemies. This is what the Lord requires of us, and it explains why John here says nothing about loving an enemy.

All love - both common human love (for which we use the word amor) and spiritual love (the love we have for what we aspire to, and for which we use the word dilectio)-involves desiring the well-being of the one loved. Whether we mean dilectio or amor (the latter being the word Christ used when He asked, "Peter, do you love me?" [John 21.171]), we do not mean that we love others in the way, say, that a glutton loves fowl-for he loves fowl in order to kill them and eat them; his love desires the end of their existence. We love food in order to consume it and be strengthened by it, but that is not how we love people. That love is benevolent and springs from a desire to do good for others. If there is no good we can do for someone, the desire for it alone suffices to prove our love. We certainly don't wish someone to be wretched so that we can extend mercy to him! Feed the hungry, certainly, but how much better it would be if no one knew hunger and we had no one to give bread to. Clothe the naked, but oh, that all were clothed and need did not exist! We bury the dead, but how we look forward to the time when life is eternal and no one dies! We reconcile those who are in disagreement, yet how much we hope for the eternal peace of Jerusalem, where everyone shall live in harmony! ...

Dear brothers, I've spoken at some length here, because the importance of the love we give to others requires it. If there be no love in us, then my words are useless, but if we have that love, then my words will be like oil cast upon a flame. To one without a feeling of love, perhaps my words may kindle it; to one with flame already lit, perhaps my words will fuel it .... " If we love one another, God remains in us, and his love is brought to perfection in us." [1 John 4.12] Begin to love, and be perfected-for God has thereby begun to dwell within you, and his in-dwelling will make you perfect. "This is how we know that we remain in him and he in us, that he has given us of his Spirit." [1 John 4.13] Thanks be to God! ...

So much do I love to speak about love that I almost wish this epistle had no end. No other text is so impassioned in calling us to love; there is no sweeter message that can be preached to us,

nor more healthful for us to imbibe-but only if we acknowledge God's gift by living in love. Let us not forget to be thankful for such a great and gracious gift. God had only one Son, but desires that He be not an only child. He wishes us to be His brothers, adopted by Him into eternal life.

**Discussion Questions:**

1. How does Augustine describe the feeling of "love " in terms of actual deeds?
2. What is the style of this sermon, and how might it have appealed to an audience?