

# Forgive Us, as We Forgive: Augustine 2

Osher Institute

Vanderbilt University

April 26, 2021

# Summary of April 19 Presentation

- Augustine identified sin as the absence of a willing, desire, or action that was absent but ought to be present.
- The fundamental sin was a failure to love God for God's own sake and all else in relation to God.
- That love was initiated in humans by God and should be sustained by them.
  - The absence of that love was sinful even if its loss was not due to personal failure. All humanity had lost the love of God in the failure of Adam and Eve.
- Augustine used Matt. 18:15-23 and John 20:22-23 to interpret Matt. 16:19. All faithful Christians participated in Christ's power to forgive sins.

# The Power to Forgive, Matthew 16:15-19

- After much teaching and many miracles, Jesus posed the question of his identity to his disciples. First, he asked what others thought of him and then what the disciples thought.
- (Jesus) said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of Hades will not prevail against it. **I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.**” *New Revised Standard Version*

# Interpretations of Matt. 16:19

- Tertullian
  - The power to bind and loose was disciplinary and legislative.
  - That power was given to Peter personally and did not belong to any office.
  - The power was used in discipline and, particularly, in deciding the status of Gentiles as Christians and the application of the Mosaic ritual law.
  - The power was not passed down to anyone.
- Cyprian
  - Peter functioned as a representative of the Twelve in receiving this power.
  - The power was given to him first to show that it was a single, shared power that was inseparable from the unity of the bishops as leaders of the church.
- Augustine
  - The power was given in response to the profession of faith and to the entire church united to the Savior as a body to its head.

# The Power to Forgive, John 20:21-23

- On the evening of the resurrection, Jesus appeared to the assembled disciples.
- Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.” When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”  
*New Revised Standard Version*

# Interpretations of John 20:22-23

- Tertullian used the association of the power with the Holy Spirit.
  - Only the “spiritual” persons in the church had been given this power.
  - The Spirit had recently ordered these persons not to forgive serious sins.
- Cyprian understood the “disciples” here as the Twelve and interpreted them as the foundational episcopal college of the church.
  - The single power was given directly to the bishops as a united “college.”
  - The power was indivisible—it could not be separated from that unity.
  - The power was exercised by individual bishops as members of the college.
- Augustine linked the power to forgive to the Holy Spirit.
  - Romans 5:5 The Spirit, as the love of God, is given to faithful Christians
  - 1 Peter 4:8 Charity covers sins
  - The power to forgive is inseparable from the unity of the church.

# The Power to Forgive: Matt. 18:15-22

- (Jesus said) “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there among them.” *New Revised Standard Version*

# Interpretation of Matt. 18:15-23

- Tertullian used the whole passage.
  - He attested to the process of mutual forgiveness among Christians for sins committed against them (but not against God).
  - In his treatise *On Repentance* applied 18:19-20 to the Christians in good standing in the church praying for the forgiveness of the penitents. They prayed as Christ and would be heard by God.
- Cyprian did not consider this passage.
- Augustine used this passage to interpret the other two.
  - The power to forgive was given to the church as a whole, to be exercised as an act of love of neighbor.
  - Some cases were to be dealt with by the church as a whole, through its officers.
  - The final section (18:19-20) showed that Christians forgave sins not committed directly against them by praying that God would forgive the sins.



# Forgiveness by Baptism

- All agreed that baptism was the primary sacrament of the forgiveness of sins.
  - Tertullian allowed that serious sin might be forgiven after baptism but was a sign that baptismal repentance had not been serious.
  - Cyprian argued that only bishops within the unity of the episcopal college (who were themselves free of serious sin) could exercise the church's power to forgive sins by baptism.
  - The Donatists applied Cyprian's teaching to individuals: only a faithful bishop could baptize and forgive sins.
    - Those who tolerated unfaithful colleagues became unfaithful thereby.
  - Caecilianists insisted that Christ alone baptized with the Holy Spirit and the bishop acted as his minister.
    - Baptism was never to be repeated; converts from other Christian groups were received by imposition of hands to for the giving of the Holy Spirit.

# Augustine on Baptismal Forgiveness

- Christ alone baptized with the Holy Spirit:
  - And John bore witness, “I saw the Spirit descend as a dove from heaven and it remained on him. I myself did not know him; but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, “He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.” John 1:32-33
- The disciples acted as ministers of Christ in giving baptism.
  - Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples. John 4:2
- Paul insisted that Christ was the source of baptism
  - What I mean is that each one of you said, “I belong to Paul,” or “I belong to Apollos,” or “I belong to Cephas,” or “I belong to Christ.” Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I am thankful that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius; lest anyone should say that you were baptized in my name.” 1 Cor. 1:12-14
- Baptism was always effective because the power of Christ was operative.

# Dual Effects of Baptism

- Consecration of the recipient to Christ
  - This was always effected and never to be repeated.
  - Joined the person to Christ and laid the foundation for participation in the redemptive work of Christ.
  - This consecration did not itself forgive sins; it would continue even in the absence of the gift of Love of God and the living of a Christian life.
- Sanctification of the baptized through the reception of the gift of the Holy Spirit.
  - Forgiveness of the guilt of sins
  - Indwelling of the Holy Spirit that moved a person to love of God and neighbor.
  - This gift could be lost through intentional sin.

# Baptism of the Unrepentant

- Even an unrepentant recipient or one who was intentionally separated from the church received and retained the baptismal consecration.
- The baptismal sanctification may have been conferred and then immediately lost or may not have been received at all.
- A schismatic who later joined the unity of the church was received with the imposition of hands for the gift of the Holy Spirit.
- An unrepentant person who was later converted undertook appropriate penitential actions but was not baptized again.
- Augustine explained that charity was communicated to the convert through union with the congregation.
  - Thus, in emergency, a “Caecelianist” catechumen could accept baptism from a Donatist bishop and be saved because of an intentional union with the world-wide church.
  - An infant could be baptized (and be saved) through the profession of faith made by parents and others within the unity of the church.

# Exercising Sanctifying Power in the Church

- Augustine believed that the church, as the body of Christ, participated in the Savior's power to forgive sins.
  - This power was conferred upon the church in Matthew 16:19 and 18:18 and John 20:22-23.
  - He believed that this power was inseparable from the love inspired by the Holy Spirit.
- Augustine identified the union of the “saints” joined together in the unity of the church by the love inspired in them by the Holy Spirit as the recipients of this power to forgive.
  - The saints exercised this power to forgive by actually forgiving those who sinned against them.
  - The saints intercedes (with Christ as their head) for the forgiveness of those who sinned against others and against God.

# The “Dove” in Canticle 6:9

- The text refers to the faithful Christians (living and dead) who are joined in the love of God and one another by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.
  - They are the body of Christ—living and dead—growing through the ages.
  - Individual members of this group cannot be identified nor are they all known to one another prior to the judgment.
  - They are fore-known to God and predestined for salvation. They do not fail in holiness.
  - They share in the sanctifying power of Christ and exercise it by their prayer and their active forgiveness of sinners.
  - Individual members of the clergy belong to this group but not by their office.
- This group serves the function of Cyprian’s episcopal college.