

# *St. Augustine's* Sermons

Calgary, Alberta

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## **The Importance of Sound Doctrine**

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The Text: Ephesians 1:15-23

15 For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, 16 I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, 17 that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, 18 having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, 19 and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might 20 that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, 21 far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. 22 And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, 23 which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

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This morning we are continuing in our study of Ephesians 1, by looking at verses 15-23. To set up what I will say this morning I would like to take a moment to talk about the importance of sound doctrine. Doctrine can be defined as something that is taught. In the case of Christianity it is the teaching of the faith. You will notice that I qualified the noun with the adjective “sound.” It is very important that what is taught in the church is sound. This means that it has to be thoroughly biblical in its focus, so that what we are learning to practice as Christians is to both understand and apply sound doctrine to our lives.

Ephesians is a wonderful example of sound doctrine as the Apostle Paul teaches with clarity who Jesus is and what he means for the life of the believer, both individually and collectively.

But why, you may ask does sound doctrine matter? Well to answer this question I need to explain what the Bible means by the word salvation. The bible teaches that we are both definitively saved and progressively saved. To know that we are definitively saved means that we know that we are the Lord's. We have been set aside as holy once for all.

However throughout our life there is progressive salvation taking place. We are not taken to heaven immediately upon coming to know Jesus Christ but are left here to do our job and to serve the Lord. We are to come to know him better in this life and progressive salvation is the process that includes our successes, failures, repentance, growth in holiness and on it goes. However if we are to continue to progress in our salvation we need to be fed and nurtured by sound doctrine. This is because the Holy Spirit is both the Spirit of holiness and the Spirit of truth. So there is an inter-dependence between understanding and action. As we come to know Jesus more and understand his will for our lives, we are having truth imparted to our minds and souls. In turn this allows for us to progress in living as Christian men and women whose lives reflect the character of Jesus.

For progressive salvation to occur in the Christian life at least three absolute changes are necessary. There must be a change in our consciousness. There must be a change in our convictions. There must be a change in our conscience. Consciousness, conviction, and conscience—these three are all vital to our progressive salvation.

Consciousness involves knowledge. Before we can willfully do what God commands and what pleases Him, we must first understand what it is that God requires. From the law comes a knowledge of sin. Also from the law comes a knowledge of righteousness. A person could "accidentally" obey the law without doing so consciously. But such an action would have no moral virtue to it.

Suppose a man enjoys driving his car at seventy kilometres an hour. It pleases him to ride at that rate of speed. He drives his car at seventy kilometres miles an hour in 80 kilometre an hour zones and in 30-kilometre-per-hour zones. When he drives in the eighty kilometre-per-hour zone, he is within the speed limit. He is obeying the law. But when he goes seventy in a 30-kilometre-per-hour-zone, he is a menace to those around him.

Suppose our mythical driver systematically refuses to look at speed limit signs. He averts his gaze from any sign that even appears to mark a speed limit. He keeps himself purposely unconscious of speed limits. At times he "happens" to obey the law, but purely by coincidence. If the man wants to achieve moral virtue as a driver and always drive within the speed limit, he must first become aware of the speed limits. In other words he must become conscious of the law.

But consciousness is not enough. We all have seen people who are quite conscious of the speed limits while they are violating them. We don't have to look beyond ourselves to discover the culprits. For our behavior to change we must move beyond consciousness to conviction.

Conviction is a matter of depth and intensity. It is one thing to be aware that a certain action is right. It is another to have a conviction about it. It is a lot easier for us to compromise our knowledge than to act against convictions. A conviction is knowledge that is settled. It has a firm hold on us. It goes beyond our brains and penetrates the conscience.

Our conscience acts as a kind of governor upon our thought and behavior. It is the inner voice that either accuses or excuses us. It monitors our thinking and acting by way of approval or disapproval. The problem is that our conscience doesn't always tell us the truth. We are adept at training it in the direction of self-approval. For the conscience to function in a godly way it must be influenced by godly convictions. To gain godly consciences, our consciousness of what is right and what is wrong must be sharpened. This involves the mind. It is a matter of sound doctrine.

Now when I talk about knowing the difference between what is right and wrong, I am not just talking about behaviour. This is important but comes after we are convinced about what is right and wrong in relation to who Jesus Christ truly is. Look at verse 15 of our passage for today: The "for this reason" is a reference back to what Paul has said about the seven-fold blessing that is available to the believer in the preceding verses. Because of the spiritual blessings available to us in the heavenlies, Paul is able give thanks for those who are receiving this letter. You will notice that he is giving thanks for what is happening in the lives of these people. Their faith has as its object the Lord Jesus Christ. The more they are growing in their knowledge of Jesus Christ their love towards one another is very tangible. This is so important for us to understand. Sound doctrine matters because our theology does affect our ethics. What we believe to be true about the Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, shapes what we believe to be true about people. Therefore we need to always keep before us what Jesus says in John 8.31: "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. 32 Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." Here Jesus affirms the central place of sound doctrine. It is not just to know his teaching but to hold to it, to live by it that matters. Such people he calls his disciples, and because they know and live in the truth they are set free.

It is important to see that what Paul prays here is for the illumination of his readers' understanding so that their knowledge might increase and abound. The graces and comforts of the Spirit are communicated to the soul by the enlightening of the understanding. Satan takes a contrary way: he gets possession of our souls by the senses and passions, Christ by the understanding; Satan through our feelings and darkened emotions. The Lord's way leads to spiritual freedom. Satan's way results in spiritual bondage.

Here in Ephesians 1 do you see how Paul handles the truth? In verses 3-14 he lays out for us the remarkable truth about what God is doing in and through Jesus Christ. Then in verses 15 – 19 he prays that this truth will become real in the lives of those for whom he is writing. The Christian Faith is true. It was true before we were born and it will remain true after you and I die. However, the question is: Is it true for you? This is where Paul

wants to go in these verses. As an apostle he desires for these people to know the fullness of the impact of what these words mean. This is why in verse 16 he writes: "I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers."

Why is he thankful? He is thankful for their faith in Jesus and their love for all the saints. But his prayer of thanksgiving leads into the prayer of intercession. As will become clear in the verses that follow, he wants them to grow in sound doctrine and he understands that God is able to work more abundantly in their lives as he gives himself to prayer on their behalf.

So what is the focus of his prayer? Verses 17-19 provide the answer:

*that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, 18 having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, 19 and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might*

Notice what Paul says in verse 17. He understands that apart from the Lord imparting to the people the spirit of wisdom and revelation we cannot know God. Notice how he addresses God here. He is the Father of Glory. This is what is called a Hebraism. It is a particularly Jewish way for speaking of God. Think of it like this. God is infinitely glorious in himself, therefore all glory is due to him from his creatures. He is the author of all that glory with which his saints are or shall be invested.

This all glorious one gives to us the Spirit of knowledge; for the Spirit of God is the teacher of the saints. Here the Holy Spirit is called the Spirit of wisdom and revelation. We have the revelation of the Spirit in the word: but will that help us, if we have not the wisdom of the Spirit in the heart? If the same Spirit who inspired the sacred scriptures does not take the veil from off our hearts, and enable us to understand and improve them, the sound doctrine of Scripture as it is taught will not be imparted to us.

When the wisdom of the Spirit is in our hearts, oh what a difference there is in our lives. We grow in acknowledging Christ's authority in our lives by an obedient conformity to him and in this we discover the freedom Jesus speaks of in John 8.

So let me ask you. Do you have the wisdom of the Spirit in your heart? Are you drawing ever closer to that place where your consciousness of Christ in His word, is establishing within you deep convictions about his character so that your conscience is more firmly rooted in living a life of obedient faith? If this is happening in your life let us give thanks with Paul for how you are growing in progressive salvation. If you do not know what I am talking about may I suggest this is because you are not yet really dealing with Jesus Christ, because he means little or nothing to you. Do you want that to change or do you choose to stay in willful indifference or rebellion against him?

My friends, there is a time in each person's life when he or she needs to consciously decide if they are to put their faith in Jesus Christ. Maybe for someone here this morning this is your time. Will you surrender to Jesus? Will you respond to His call for you to put your faith in Him? When you do respond with sincerity he will honour you as you come to know that you are decisively saved and begin to know the grace of progressive salvation.

As we come into the fuller awareness of the quickening work of the Holy Spirit in our lives we have a heightened awareness of the hope of our calling. To have the eyes of our heart enlightened means that we are coming to see deep spiritual truths that we never before had any awareness of, as God's spirit gives to us spiritual insight. The Christian calling is hope-filled. This means that we are learning by grace to grow in dealing with God in a trustful, hope-filled way. Matthew Henry was a well known bible commentator in the 18th century. Listen to what he writes about this hope:

*It is a desirable thing to know what this hope of our calling is, to have such an acquaintance with the immense privileges of God's people, and the expectations they have from God, and with respect to the heavenly world, as to be quickened thereby to the utmost diligence and patience in the Christian course. We ought to labour after, and pray earnestly for, a clearer insight into, and a fuller acquaintance with, the great objects of a Christian's hopes. Besides the heavenly inheritance prepared for the saints, there is a present inheritance in the saints; for grace is glory begun, and holiness is happiness in the bud.*

Is not this a lovely turn of phrase. Grace is glory begun and holiness is happiness in the bud. For grace and holiness to be ever more present to us we have available to us the power that raised Jesus from the dead. What is this power? Well it can be understood as the power of love over against the love of power. So many people try to assert their influence over others by grasping onto a love of power. Not so for the Christian. We are governed instead by the power of love. For it is this power that was so at work in our Lord as he chose the humiliation of the cross as the way of our salvation. Paul wants to impart to us the understanding that as we learn to live this way, the same power that raised Jesus from the dead will be at work in us.

This is the point he is making in verse 20. It is then affirmed by what he goes on to say in verses 21-23. He is making the case that because of who Jesus is he is worthy of our trust and faith. Here Paul gets caught up in a rapturous canticle celebrating the absolute supremacy of Jesus Christ.

seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, 21 far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. 22 And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, 23 which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Paul is declaring that there is nothing in the physical universe or the spiritual realm that is greater than Jesus Christ. Notice that he says this supremacy will not only hold true in the

age to come but it is also a reality now. This is one of those insights that can only be revealed to us by the Holy Spirit. But as the truth of this takes a deeper root in our own hearts and within the collective heart of St. Augustine's we will more fully realize what it means to be his body the church. It is this theme what Paul will pick up in the chapters that follow. However notice please what is said here about the Church. Paul views the church not from the perspective of its human imperfections but from the perspective of Jesus as the one who is head over all things. As we will see in the weeks to come, when we understand the Ephesians' doctrine of the church to our congregation we will be changed.

Therefore in conclusion I want to invite you to not only hear these words but to enter into a prayerful reflection on these words. To this end as we prepare to begin the season of Lent the leadership of St. Augustine's wants to invite us all to gather in our small homes groups and in other collective settings in order to place before us the Letter of the Ephesians in a prayerful manner. During each of the six weeks of Lent we are invited to prayerfully read through one of the six chapters of this Letter. As we do so may we pray with Paul for the Holy Spirit to grant to us a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, 18 having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, 19 and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might.

It is my hope and pray that as we enter into this Season of Prayer through small group gatherings and through our participation in our Lenten Prayer Vigil that St. Augustine's will be a congregation where the Sound Doctrine of Ephesians will be imparted to us by the Holy Spirit as we mature in our progressive salvation. May our consciousness of the Lord be heightened, our convictions strengthened and our consciences quickened so that we may live more fully in the truth of Ephesians.

What may we hope to encounter from such an adventure in prayerful study? Some of you may have heard of the name Jonathan Edwards. He lived from 1703 to 1758. He is considered by scholars to be one of the greatest theological and philosophical thinkers the United States has ever produced. At the age of 13 he could read Greek, Latin and Hebrew fluently. He graduated from Yale University as an undergraduate at the age of 17 and completed his masters at the age of 20. For most of his adult life, Edwards was a pastor. In 1734 he was preaching a series of five sermons at the church he served on the theme of justification by faith alone. These were very theological sermons that dealt with the truth of this glorious doctrine. As a result of this teaching something happened in that town. This is how Edwards describes it:

*“This work of God made a glorious alternation in the town of Northampton Connecticut, so that in the spring and summer of 1734 the town seemed to be full of the presence of God.”*

Let me comment on this. Doctrine and truth have an emotional side to it. People ought to be emotional about the truth. Truth can produce right emotions. The truth inspired

spiritual passion. This is what Paul is praying for in these verses from Ephesians and this is what Edwards was describing here.

He goes on to write:

*“The town was never so full of love. Nor was it so full of joy as it was then. There were remarkable tokens of God’s presence in almost every house. It was a time of joy in families because of the salvation brought unto them. Parents rejoicing over their children as new born and husbands over their wives and wives over their husbands.”*

I like the phrase, “remarkable tokens of God’s presence in almost every house”. As we join into a prayerful study of Ephesians may we be open in this community to an awakening to the presence of God so that knowing we are decisively saved, we can continue to grow in our progressive salvation as we direct our faith towards Jesus and cultivate our love for all the Saints.

Amen