

“Most Merciful God, who art of purer eyes than to behold iniquity, and has promised forgiveness to all those who confess and forsake their sins; we come before thee in a humble sense of our own unworthiness, acknowledging our manifold transgressions of thy righteous laws. But, O gracious father, who desirest not the death of a sinner, look upon us, we beseech thee, in mercy, and forgive us all our transgressions. Make us deeply sensible of the great evil of them; and work in us a hearty contrition; that we may obtain forgiveness at thy hands who art ever ready to receive humble and penitent sinners; for the sake of thy Son Jesus Christ, our only Savior and Redeemer. Amen. “

This prayer from the family prayer section of our Prayer Book, pages 589-90, is the prayer of a humble person, who has come to the realization of his need for God. A proud person who regards this as overstated and offensive will never experience the God who loves him and is ready to forgive him. In this prayer the petitioner accepts that he is not worthy of God’s attention, which in itself, is an act of humility, and the first step to knowing God; he acknowledges his many sins and asks God to make him sensible of the great evil of them. To God, sin is an abomination; Proverbs 16: 16-19; Revelation 21:27. It is not subject to debate, or soft definition. Saint Augustine defined evil as the opposite of good. Since there is no good sin, the act, by definition, is evil. It does no good for anyone to place qualifiers around the word sin: “it wasn’t that bad;” “no harm was done.” Statements like these are escapist and can never be justified truthfully. The world’s view of good and evil can vary from culture to culture. There are some that deny evil is in our world. But reality and circumstances shows it exists. Jeremiah 7:30; 2 Isaiah 66:4; Jeremiah 32:30; 2 Kings 21:15. Life in this world is filled with evidence of evil.

Saint Augustine’s favorite verse from the New Testament is John 15:5: “Without me, you can do nothing.” These words are Jesus’ declaration that we must become totally dependent on him if we wish to obtain eternal life in the next world and enjoy “perfect” reality. He is the vine we are the branches; no branch can survive apart from its life-source. Try pulling a rose bush from the soil and its needed nutrients and see how long it lasts. The verse represents opens the door onto answers to fuller understanding about our existence: why we are here and where we are going.

Christ said that one day the world will come to an end, we don’t get to stay here forever; this world is not permanent, it will end one day. This reality does not fall gracefully on the ears of the proud often dismissing it, either out of fear or ignorance or both. On the other hand, heaven is eternal – so too, is damnation or hell.

During a time in his life when Augustine was undergoing great turmoil in his heart (the regrets he was experiencing from his past life of many sins) he began to take the Christian religion more seriously. While out walking in a garden, alone with his thoughts and struggling with the guilt of his past sins: an illegitimate son, illicit affairs, drink, wild living, and trouble-making, he heard a small voice say “Tolle lege, Tolle lege,” “pick up and read, pick up and read.” Next to him, lying on a small table was the New Testament. He picked it up and opened it, his eyes fixing on the words of Saint Paul: “Not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts.” Romans 13:13-14. Up to this point, Augustine led a life we would define today as a street punk, full of irresponsible and reckless behavior.

For the first time the words of Paul forced him to look hard at his past, setting before him, the embodiment of all his sins and mistakes - and they were many - and it came crashing down on him with breath-taking force. The very door to his soul was opened and what he saw troubled him greatly. He was all these things and more. Book in hand, he threw himself to the ground and openly wept. He was transformed there in that garden and went on to be one of the greatest Fathers of the Church and by the power and depth of his remarkable mind and learning left behind a legacy that formed the spiritual and intellectual foundation of Western Civilization.

What is it that causes people to suppress what they know to be true but choose to ignore it? Put it off? Shroud it with activities and excuses that move them off the issue? We can force ourselves into thinking we do not know, but can we really? The science of psychiatry tells us that the most stressful conditions for the human mind occur from what we do not or refuse to know. Wondering, despair in life, disappointment, the crushing weight of such emotions can become more than a person can endure. The church encourages anyone who is undergoing such instability in life to let go and let God. We cannot control everything in life; some of them are beyond our ability to manage. They will surface! This was

Augustine, who eventually and after much pain and sorrow placed himself into the hands of God. He simply climbed into his lap. History points to him as achieving many great things that contributed to the well-being of the Church. None more famous than the words that sum up what he eventually found in God: "Thou hast made us for thyself, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee, O Lord." These words reveal one of the great truths in life. Do not look to this world and its miserable failings for true peace of soul and mind: these are the property of God and the world does not know them or him.

Peter was a man who, like many others during his time, saw many false messiahs come into their midst only to be proven frauds. It frustrated him. Tradition says he was a man given to temper tantrums and moods of irritability. The disappointments in life weighed down on him, making him an unhappy man. Then he met Jesus. At this point our Lord had already healed the sick and the lame and cleansed lepers. Luke: 4. He even entered Peter's house and tended to his mother-in-law who was sick with a severe fever and healed her as well. Luke 4:38-40. Yes. Peter was married.

In the Gospel reading we find Jesus calling to Peter and the apostles who were returning from a night of fishing, and empty boats, to allow him to enter one of them. The crowds pressed on him so as to crowd him, leaving no room to stand on the shore of the lake. He stepped into the boat, sat down and continued to teach the people within earshot. When he finished he asked Peter to move out into deeper water and prepare for a great catch. Typically, Peter complained. "Master, he said, we have fished all night and haven't caught anything." We do not know why Peter did what Jesus asked but doing so changed his life. He let down the fishnet and caught so many fishes the net broke. He called out to the other apostles in another boat and together they pulled in enough fishes to nearly sink both vessels. Stunned by what he just witnessed and overwhelmed with sorrow, Peter became convinced he was before God and dropped to his knees and in an act of incredible humility he confessed his unworthiness to be in the presence of God. Peter confessed his short-comings that day. The crush of his sins and misdeeds bore down on him. He underwent a soul-cleansing. His confession echoes the Prayer of Contrition, from our Prayer Book, quoted at the beginning of this sermon. "Leave me," he said to Jesus, "for I am a sinful man." He may as well have said: "Most merciful God, who art of purer eyes than to behold my iniquity." His sorrow and tears revealed his awareness of his past behavior and became "deeply sensible of their great evil." He obtained forgiveness that day at the hands of God in Christ.

Humans tend to treat guilt the way a horse treats pain. He runs from it, believing he can leave the pain behind. Like Augustine, Peter stopped running that day. The temper tantrums, feelings of frustration, moodiness, only served to illustrate his attempts to avoid and mask his guilt.

Peter went on to be one of Christ's leading apostles, yet he continued to fall into sin. But during those times he cried out to God for mercy and underwent great contrition for having deserted his master. That is exactly what sin is. He denied knowing Jesus three times; he was on the wrong side of the first great issue before the Church in Jerusalem, disagreeing with Paul and James the first bishop of Jerusalem. One did not have to first become a Jew, as Peter believed, before becoming a Christian or Christ-follower as the apostolic consensus concluded. Just believe on the name of Jesus and be baptized. When he did these things he fell into his old self, hard-headed, testy and disagreeable. But he realized his mistakes and confessed them. Why? He, like Augustine that day face down in the garden, and in his boat, on his knees, experienced the reality of God. Experiencing God places us on the road to spiritual formation which begins with desire to learn and know more. Left to our own, desire turns inward on our own pleasure and lust (wrong desires) as Augustine and Peter experienced for years. They finally grew up. Casting away their childish attempts to run from their guilt as if it could be vanquished by doing so; it cannot. Saint Paul wrote about this very thing: "When I was a child I spoke like a child, I understood as a child; but when I became a man I put away childish things." 1 Corinthians 13:11. True and higher living begins with Christianity fully practiced. It is the way to maturity and puts away, once and for all, childish self-deceit; there is no other way to genuine peace. It is a pilgrimage, a long-term pursuit of God. Desire, which is God-given, is the driving force on the road towards spiritual progress. Augustine and Peter represent the whole of human existence as a journey. Every step we take either moves us closer to God or further away. The choice is ours. If we choose wisely, we will find one of the great truths of the Christian faith: Know thyself first, then you will know and experience the joy of God. This is the true game-changer.