

## Augustine, *The Spirit and the Letter*

Augustine wrote *The Spirit and the Letter* late in A.D. 412 or perhaps early in 413. It is one of several books he wrote during that decade to articulate an understanding of the grace of God over against views held by Pelagius and others around him, views generally known as Pelagianism, which exhibited an overconfidence in the human ability for goodness.

*The Spirit and the Letter* is readily available in at least three English translations:

Augustine. *On the Spirit and the Letter*. In *Augustin: Anti-Pelagian Writings*, translated by P. Holmes, the translation revised and an introduction prefixed by Benjamin B. Warfield. In *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers (NPNF)*, first series, vol. 5, pp. 83–114. Reprint, New York: Hendrickson, 1994.

This translation is also available in *Basic Writings of Saint Augustine*, vol. 1, pp. 459–518. New York: Random House, 1948.

This translation is also available online:

<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1502.htm>

<http://www.logoslibrary.org/augustine/spirit/01.html>

Augustine. *The Spirit and the Letter*. In *Augustine: Later Works*, selected and translated with Introductions by John Burnaby, pp. 182–250. The Library of Christian Classics: Ichthus Edition (LCC), vol. 8. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1955.

Augustine. *The Spirit and the Letter*. In *Answer to the Pelagians: The Punishment and Forgiveness of Sins and the Baptism of Little Ones, The Spirit and the Letter, Nature and Grace, The Perfection of Human Righteousness, The Deeds of Pelagius, The Grace of Christ and Original Sin, The Nature and Origin of the Soul*, introduction, translation, and notes by Roland J. Teske, pp. 133–194. The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Part I — Books, vol. 23. Hyde Park, New York: New City Press (NCP), 1997.

Historically, the text of *The Spirit and the Letter* has been divided in two different and unrelated ways, one with thirty-six longer sections and the other with sixty-six shorter sections. Each of these three English translations marks both sets of sections, which is particularly important for following references from secondary literature which may be using only one or the other.

Moreover, these translations agree that noting the shorter sections provides sufficient and more precise references and that using them exclusively provides more concise references. However, these translations disagree in what to call these longer and shorter sections, in which system to note to first, in the use of larger and smaller Arabic and Roman numerals, and so forth.

In this study guide, I shall refer first to the longer thirty-six sections as “chapters” and then second to the sixty-six shorter sections as “paragraphs.” This should make it possible, with some

care on the part of the reader, to use this guide with any of the translations listed above. At the same time, the quotations and page references which follow are from the NCP edition, which is the most recent translation.

**Class 1: Augustine, *The Spirit and the Letter*, 1.1–3.5, Introduction [pp. 133–156]**

Introduction to Augustine, A.D. 354–430 (Augustine lived closer in time to Jesus Christ than we are to John Calvin)

Pronunciation: aw-**gus**-tin or au-gus-**teen**

Baptized in A.D. 387, ordained in 391

Made Bishop of Hippo, in northern Africa, in A.D. 396 or 397

Doctor of Grace (forgiveness), vs. Pelagius (who emphasized human goodness)

Lived through adoption of Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed (A.D. 381)

Lived through the fall of Rome (A.D. 410), whereupon many fled from Rome to Hippo

At his death, his secretary said he wrote more books than could be read in a lifetime;  
we still have 113 books, 200 letters, 500 sermons

All good Catholic, Protestant, and Reformed thought traces back to him

Augustine, *On Christian Teaching* (begun A.D. 395?–397, finished A.D. 426–427)

Title also translated as *On Christian Doctrine* and as *On Teaching Christianity*

Ostensibly a book about how to study, to understand, and to preach the Bible

Example: “The first rule in this laborious task is, as I have said, to *know* these books; not necessarily to understand them but to read them so as to commit them to *memory*.” (2.30; i.e., for starters, memorize the Bible!)

Why is studying the Bible important for us all? Because it is there that we meet God!

Note emphasis on reliability of text and on confidence in revelation

Also, the book is a remarkable summary of the Christian faith, especially love of God

Makes distinction between things and signs; we are to use the signs to find our way to the things; we are to enjoy the things: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit

Basis of first question and answer of Westminster Shorter Catechism

Preachers are to instruct, to delight, and to move their listeners

Many translations in print and available, indicating continuing importance

Augustine, *Confessions* (A.D. 397), important for understanding Augustine’s life and thought

(1) Confession of sin, more (2) confession of faith, and even (3) confession of praise

Many translations in print and available, indicating continuing importance

Conversation with God, furthering conversion

Augustine could not have written *Confessions* without praying Psalms daily

Augustine exhausted the wisdom of the ancient world

He brought the best of it into Christianity

In the *Confessions*, Augustin provides us with his intellectual autobiography:

1. Cicero, *Hortensius*, love of wisdom, search for truth, search for God
2. Manicheism: radical dualists
  - Non-Judaistic, pre-Christian; Christian heretics, gnostics
  - spiritual is good, material is evil
  - Also, God is incorruptible, but fights evil
  - Augustine became dissatisfied with this
3. Skepticism
  - Augustine began to doubt his doubts
4. Ambrose, reading of Scriptures, especially allegorical interpretation
  - I.e., avoided problems of Manicheism's literal readings
  - Note: Augustine was a teacher of rhetoric, public speaking
  - Much impressed by Ambrose's preaching
5. Neoplatonism
  - Forms, participation
  - All things are real insofar as they have being
  - Still, question of evil
  - Whatever is, is good; evil is not a substance (doctrine of creation)
  - Wickedness is a perversity of the will
  - God is truth
  - Platonists, immaterial truth
  - "Grant me chastity and continence, but not yet." [vs. Socrates, To know the good is to do it.]; i.e., problem of the will
6. Conversion to Christianity: Take and read (the *Bible*)
  - Moral and personal conversion

Augustine, *City of God* (A.D. 413–426)

The popular faith that Rome was eternal was shattered by the fall of Rome, A.D. 410. Augustine wrote that the city of man (Rome) is passing, but the city of God is eternal. Many translations in print and available, indicating continuing importance. Of increasing interest to us during the decline of the western world.

Augustine, *The Spirit and the Letter* (A.D. 412 or 413), Introduction (1.1–3.5) [pp. 144–146]

Chapter 2, paragraph 4, Augustine articulates the belief against which this book is written:

"But we must fiercely and strongly oppose those who think that the power of the human will can by itself, without the help of God, either attain righteousness or make progress in tending toward it." [p. 145]

Chapter 3, paragraph 5, Augustine makes his major affirmation of this book:

“We, on the other hand, say that the human will is helped to achieve righteousness in this way: Besides the fact that human beings are created with free choice of the will and besides the teaching by which they are commanded how they ought to live, they receive the Holy Spirit so that there arises in their minds a delight in and a love for that highest and immutable good that is God, even now while they walk by faith, not yet by vision. By this [love] given to them like the pledge of a gratuitous gift, they are set afire with the desire to cling to the creator and burn to come to a participation in that true light, so that they have their well-being from him from whom they have their being. For free choice is capable only of sinning, if the way of truth remains hidden. And when what we should do and the goal we should strive for begins to be clear, unless we find delight in it and love it, we do not act, do not begin, do not live good lives. But so that we may love it, *the love of God* is poured out *in our hearts*, not by free choice which comes from ourselves, but *by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us* (Rom 5:5).” [pp. 145–146]

**Class 2: Augustine, *The Spirit and the Letter*, 4.6–12.20, the Letter that Kills**  
[pp. 156–170]

Chapter 4, paragraph 6, Augustine sets forth the problem, that the letter of the law kills:

“That teaching from which we receive the commandment to live in continence and rectitude is the letter that kills, unless the life-giving Spirit is present. . . . The very object of desire grows more attractive when it is forbidden.” [p. 146]

Chapter 5, paragraph 7, Augustine indicates that freedom of choice and instruction by the law are not enough and that we need additionally the gift of the Spirit:

“To live a good life is a gift of God. This is the case, not merely because God gave human beings free choice, without which one lives neither a good life nor a bad life, and not merely because he gave the commandment by which he teaches them how they should live, but because by the Holy Spirit he has poured out love in their hearts.” [p. 147]

Chapter 5, paragraph 8:

“The letter of the law, which teaches that we should not sin, kills, if the life-giving Spirit is not present.” [p. 148]

Chapter 7, paragraph 11:

“He [God] extends his mercy, not because they know him, but in order that they may know him, and he extends his righteousness, by which he justifies the sinner, not because they are upright of heart, but in order that they may be upright of heart.” [p. 149]

Chapter 12, paragraph 19:

“Their vanity is really a disease; they mislead themselves, when they suppose they are something, though they are nothing.” [p. 155]

Chapter 12, paragraph 20:

“We are helped by God to act with righteousness, not insofar as God gave us a law full of good and holy commandments, but insofar as our own will, without which we can do nothing good, is helped and raised up through the gift of the Spirit of grace.” [p. 156]

**Class 3: Augustine, *The Spirit and the Letter*, 13.21–25.42, the Law of Faith**  
[pp. 170–177]

Chapter 13, paragraph 22, Augustine distinguishes between the Law of Works and the Law of Faith:

“Accordingly, by the law of works God says: Do what I command! By the law of faith we say to God: Give what you command!” [p. 157. Note how this echoes his prayer from fifteen years earlier in his *Confessions*, Book X, xxix (40), “Grant what you command, and command what you will.”]

“Human beings are not justified by the commandments that teach us to live well, but only through faith in Jesus Christ, that is, not by the law of works, but by the law of faith, not by the letter, but by the Spirit, not by the merits of actions, but gratuitously by grace.” [p. 158]

Chapter 14, paragraph 25:

“The letter forbidding sin does not give life to human beings, but rather kills them by increasing desire and augmenting sinfulness because of transgression, unless through the law of faith in Christ Jesus grace sets them free, when love is poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.” [p. 160]

Chapter 14, paragraph 26:

“It is clear, then, that, if the new condition of the Spirit is lacking, the old condition of the letter makes people guilty by reason of the knowledge of sin rather than sets them free from sin.” [p. 160]

Chapter 19, paragraph 32:

“Let no Christian then depart from this faith, for it alone is the Christian faith. . . . When the life-giving Spirit is present, he makes us love the very same thing, now written within, which the law made us fear, when it was written exteriorly.” [p. 164]

Chapter 21, paragraph 36:

“What then are the laws of God that are written by God himself on our hearts but the very presence of the Holy Spirit?” [p. 166. Note how closely he ties together the word of God and the Spirit of God. To have one is to have the other.]

**Class 4: Augustine, *The Spirit and the Letter*, 26.43–29.51, the Law in Gentiles**  
[pp. 177–185]

Chapter 28, paragraph 48, Augustine deals with the possible objection that the Gentiles have the law written in their hearts, affirming that in a limited way but distinguishing it from the gift of the Spirit:

“Nonetheless, the image of God has not been removed from the human soul by the stain of earthly loves to such a point that not even the faintest outlines of it remain. Hence, the soul can be correctly said to observe or know some elements of the law even amid the godlessness of its life.” [pp. 173–174]

**Class 5: Augustine, *The Spirit and the Letter*, 30.52–34.60, Grace strengthens Free Choice** [pp. 185–189]

Chapter 30, paragraph 52, Augustine shows that the Spirit does not destroy free choice but strengthens it:

“Are we then doing away with free choice through grace? Heaven forbid! Rather, we make free choice stronger. After all, as the law is not done away with through faith, so free choice is not done away with, but strengthened by grace. . . . Free choice is not done away with by grace, but strengthened, because grace heals the will by which we freely love righteousness.” [p. 177]

Chapter 32, paragraph 55:

“Faith, then, is in our power, because we believe when we will, and when we believe, we believe willingly.” [p. 180]

Chapter 32, paragraph 56:

“For it [i.e., the love through which faith works] would not be in us, however much there is in us, if it were not poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. The love of God said to be poured out in our hearts is not that by which he loves us, but that by which he makes us love him. In the same way, the righteousness of God is that by which we are made righteous by his gift and the salvation of God is that by which he makes us saved, and the faith of Jesus Christ is that by which he makes us believers. This is the righteousness of God which he not only teaches through the commandments of the law, but also gives through the gift of the Spirit.” [pp. 181–182]

Chapter 33, paragraph 58:

“The free choice which the creator has given to the rational soul as part of its nature is a neutral power that can either turn to faith or fall into unbelief.” [p. 182]

**Class 6: Augustine, *The Spirit and the Letter*, 35.61–36.66, Conclusion**

Chapter 36, paragraph 64:

“The first commandment of righteousness by which we are ordered to love God with the whole heart and the whole soul and the whole mind, upon which there follows the second about loving the neighbor, we will fulfill in that life, when we see face to face. But this commandment has been given to us now in order to admonish us about what we ought to ask for in faith, about where we ought to place our hope, and about how we ought to forget what lies behind and stretch ourselves out toward what lies ahead. Accordingly, so far as I can judge, they who know how far they are, despite their progress, from the perfection of righteousness have made much progress in the righteousness which still needs to be made perfect.” [p. 187. Note that while perfection of obedience is not possible for us in this life but only in the next, those who are most keenly aware of the imperfections of their obedience are actually those who are farthest along their way toward perfect obedience.]

Chapter 36, paragraph 65:

“If persons have some righteousness, they must not presume to have it from themselves, but from the grace of God who justifies, and they must still hunger and thirst for righteousness from him.” [p. 189]

Chapter 36, paragraph 66:

“There always remains something hidden in the depths of God’s judgments so that the mouths of everyone else, even of the righteous, are closed for their own praise, and are only opened for the praise of God.” [p. 189]

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