

Confessions - Book I - Chapter IX

by St. Augustine

Transcript

14. O my God! What miseries and mockeries did I then experience when it was impressed on me that obedience to my teachers was proper to my boyhood estate if I was to flourish in this world and distinguish myself in those tricks of speech which would gain honor for me among men, and deceitful riches! To this end I was sent to school to get learning, the value of which I knew not--wretch that I was. Yet if I was slow to learn, I was flogged. For this was deemed praiseworthy by our forefathers and many had passed before us in the same course, and thus had built up the precedent for the sorrowful road on which we too were compelled to travel, multiplying labor and sorrow upon the sons of Adam. About this time, O Lord, I observed men praying to thee, and I learned from them to conceive thee--after my capacity for understanding as it was then--to be some great Being, who, though not visible to our senses, was able to hear and help us. Thus as a boy I began to pray to thee, my Help and my Refuge, and, in calling on thee, broke the bands of my tongue. Small as I was, I prayed with no slight earnestness that I might not be beaten at school. And when thou didst not heed me--for that would have been giving me over to my folly--my elders and even my parents too, who wished me no ill, treated my stripes as a joke, though they were then a great and grievous ill to me.

15. Is there anyone, O Lord, with a spirit so great, who cleaves to thee with such steadfast affection (or is there even a kind of obtuseness that has the same effect)--is there any man who, by cleaving devoutly to thee, is endowed with so great a courage that he can regard indifferently those racks and hooks and other torture weapons from which men throughout the world pray so fervently to be spared; and can they scorn those who so greatly fear these torments, just as my parents were amused at the torments with which our teachers punished us boys? For we were no less afraid of our pains, nor did we beseech thee less to escape them. Yet, even so, we were sinning by writing or reading or studying less than our assigned lessons.

For I did not, O Lord, lack memory or capacity, for, by thy will, I possessed enough for my age. However, my mind was absorbed only in play, and I was punished for this by those who were doing the same things themselves. But the idling of our elders is called business; the idling of boys, though quite like it, is punished by those same elders, and no one pities either the boys or the men. For will any common sense observer agree that I was rightly punished as a boy for playing ball--just because this hindered me from learning more quickly those lessons by means of which, as a man, I could play at more shameful games? And did he by whom I was beaten do anything different? When he was worsted in some small controversy with a fellow teacher, he was more tormented by anger and envy than I was when beaten by a playmate in the ball game.

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