

Sermon on John 5:19

by St. Augustine

Faith is the step of understanding, and understanding is the attainment of faith, as we see in the relationship between faith and sight, and the significance of Christ's incarnation.

Scripture: Isaiah 7:9, John 5:19, John 14:9, Romans 1:20, 2 Peter 1:19

Topics: "Faith And Reason", "Trinity Doctrine"

Description

St. Augustine preaches about the mysteries and secrets of the kingdom of God, emphasizing the importance of faith as a step towards understanding. He highlights the need to believe before seeking understanding, as faith itself provides a certain light in the Scriptures, Prophecy, Gospel, and Apostles' teachings. Augustine urges believers to awaken their reason, examine God's creation, and seek the Author of all things through faith in the unseen. He explains the relationship between the Father and the Son, emphasizing their unity in divine works and the Trinity's operation in creation and miracles.

Transcript

THE mysteries and secrets of the kingdom of God first seek for believing men, that they may make them understanding. For faith is understanding's step; and understanding faith's attainment. This the Prophet expressly says to all who prematurely and in undue order look for understanding, and neglect faith. For he says, "Unless ye believe, ye shall not understand." Faith itself then also hath a certain light of its own in the Scriptures, in Prophecy, in the Gospel, in the Lessons of the Apostles. For all these things which are read to us in this present time, are lights in a dark place, that we may be nourished up unto the day. The Apostle Peter says, "We have a more sure word of prophecy, where-unto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day-star arise in your hearts."

Ye see then, Brethren, how exceedingly unregulated and disordered in their haste are they who like immature conceptions seek an untimely birth before the birth; who say to us, "Why dost thou bid me believe what I do not see? Let me see something that I may believe. Thou biddest me believe whilst yet I see not; I wish to see, and by seeing to believe, not by hearing." Let the Prophet speak. "Unless ye believe, ye shall not understand." Thou wishest to ascend, and dost forget the steps. Surely, out of all order. O man, if I could show thee already what thou mightest see, I should not exhort thee to believe.

Faith then, as it has been elsewhere defined, is "the firm support of those who hope the evidence of things which are not seen." If they are not seen, how are they evidenced to be? What! Whence are these things which thou seest, but from That which thou seest not? To be sure thou dost see somewhat that

thou mayest believe somewhat, and froth that thou seest, mayest believe what thou seest not. Be not ungrateful to Him who hath made thee see, whereby thou mayest be able to believe what as yet thou canst not see. God hath given thee eyes in the body, reason in the heart; arouse the reason of the heart, wake up the interior inhabitant of thine interior eyes, let it take to its windows, examine the creature of God. For there is one within who sees by the eyes. For when thy thoughts within thee are on any other subject, and the inhabitant within is turned away, the things which are before thine eyes thou seest not. For to no purpose are the windows open, when he who looks through them is away. It is not then the eyes that see, but some one sees by the eyes; awake him, arouse him. For this hath not been denied thee; God hath made thee a rational animal, set thee over the cattle, formed thee after His Own image. Oughtest thou to use them as the cattle do; only to see what to add to thy belly, not to thy soul? Stir up, I say, the eye of reason, use thine eyes as a man should, consider the heaven and earth, the ornaments of the heaven, the fruitfulness of the earth, the flight of the birds, the swimming of the fish, the virtue of the seeds, the order of the seasons; consider the works, and seek for the Author; take a view of what thou seest, and seek Him whom thou seest not. Believe on Him whom thou seest not, because of these things which thou seest. And lest thou think that it is with mine own words that I have exhorted thee; hear the Apostle saying, "For the invisible things of God from the creation of the world are clearly seen by those things which are made."

These things thou disregardedst, nor didst look upon them as a man, but as an irrational animal. The Prophet cried out to thee, and cried in vain. "Be ye not like to horse and mule, which have no understanding." These things I say thou didst see, and disregard. God's daily miracles were disesteemed, not for their easiness, but their constant repetition. For what is more difficult to understand than a man's birth, that one who was in existence should by dying depart into darkness, and that one who was not, I by being born should come forth to light? What so marvellous, what so difficult to comprehend? But with God easy to be done. Marvel at these things, awake; at His unusual works, thou canst wonder, are they greater than those which thou art accustomed to see? Men wondered that our Lord God Jesus Christ filled so many thousands with five loaves; and they do not wonder that through a few grains the whole earth is filled with crops. When the water was made wine, men saw it, and were amazed; what else takes place with the rain along the root of the vine? He did the one, He does the other; the one that thou mayest be fed, the other that thou mayest wonder. But both are wonderful, for both are the works of God. Man sees unusual things, and wonders; whence is the man himself who wonders? where was he? whence came he forth? whence the fashion of his body? whence the distinction of his limbs? whence that beautiful form? from what beginnings? what contemptible beginnings? And he wonders at other things, when he the wonderer is himself a great wonder. Whence then are these things which thou seest but froth Him whom thou seest not? But as I had begun to say, because these things were disesteemed by thee, He came Himself to do unusual things, that in these usual ones too thou mightest acknowledge thy Creator. He came to Whom it is said, "Renew signs." To Whom it is said, "Show forth Thy marvellous mercies." For dispensing them He ever was; He dispensed them, and no one marvelled. Therefore came He a Little one to the little, He came a Physician to the sick, who was able to come when He would, to return when He would, to do whatsoever He would, to judge as He would. And this, His will, is very righteousness; yea what He willeth, I say, is very righteousness. For that is not unrighteous which He willeth, nor can that be right which He willeth not. He came to raise the dead, men marvelling that He restored a man to the light who was in light already, He who day by day bringeth forth to the light those who were not.

These things He did, yet was He despised by the many, who considered not so much what great things He did, as how small He was; as though they said within themselves, "These are divine things, but He is a

man." Two things then thou seest, divine works, and a man. If divine works cannot be wrought but by God, take heed lest in This Man God lie concealed. Attend, I say, to what thou seest, believe what thou seest not. He hath not abandoned thee, who hath called thee to believe; though He enjoin thee to believe that which thou canst not see: yet hath He not given thee up to see nothing whereby thou mayest be able to believe what thou dost not see. Is the creation itself a small sign, a small indication of the Creator? He also came, He did miracles. Thou couldest not see God, a man thou couldest; so God was made Man, that in One thou mightest have both what to see, and what to believe. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Thus thou hearest, and as yet seest not. Lo, He comes, lo, He is born, lo, He comes forth of a woman, who made man and woman. He who made man and woman was not made by man and woman. For thou wouldest peradventure have been likely to despise Him for being born, the manner of His birth canst thou not despise; for He ever was before that He was born. Lo, I say, He took a Body, He was clothed in Flesh, He came forth from the womb. Dost thou now see? seest thou now, I say? I ask as to the Flesh, but I point out as to That Flesh; something thou seest, and something thou seest not. Lo, in this very Birth, there are at once two things, one which thou mayest see, and another thou mayest not see; but so that by this which thou seest, thou mayest believe that which thou seest not. Thou hadst begun to despise, because thou seest Him who was born; believe what thou dost not see, that He was born of a virgin. "How trifling a person," says one, "is he who was born!" But how great is He who was of a virgin born! And He who was born of a virgin brought thee a temporal miracle; He was not born of a father, of any man, I mean, His father, yet was He born of the flesh. But let it not seem impossible to thee, that He was born by His mother only, Who made man before father and mother.

He brought thee then a temporal miracle, that thou mayest seek and admire Him who is Eternal. For He "who came forth as a Bridegroom out of His chamber," that is, out of the virgin's womb, where the holy nuptials were celebrated of the Word and the Flesh: He brought, I say, a temporal miracle; but He is Himself: eternal, He is coeternal with the Father, He it is, who "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." He did for thee whereby thou mightest be cured, that thou mightest be able to see what thou didst not see. What thou despisest in Christ, is not yet the contemplation of him that is made whole, but the medicine of the sick. Do not hasten to the vision of the whole. The Angels see, the Angels rejoice, the Angels feed Thereon and live; Whereon they feed faileth not, nor is their food minished. In the thrones of glory, in the regions of the heavens, in the parts which are above the heavens, the Word is seen by the Angels, and is their Joy; is their Food, and endureth. But in order that man might eat Angel's Bread, the Lord of Angels became Man. This is our Salvation, the Medicine of the infirm, the Food of the whole.

And He spake to men, and said what ye have now heard, "The Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He seeth the Father do." Is there now any one, think we, that understandeth this? Is there any one; think we, in whom the eye-salve of the flesh hath now its effect to the discerning in any fashion the brightness of the Divinity? He hath spoken, let us speak too; He, because the Word; we, because of the Word. And why speak we, howsoever we do it, of the Word? Because we were made by the Word after the likeness of the Word. As far then as we are capable of, as far as we can be partakers of that ineffableness, let us also speak, and let us not be contradicted. For our faith hath gone before, so that we may say, "I believed, therefore have I spoken." I speak then that which I believe; whether or no I also see, or howsoever I see; He seeth rather; ye cannot see it. But when I shall have spoken, whether he who sees what I speak of, believe that I see too what I have spoken of, or whether he believe it not, what is that to me? Let him only really see, and let him believe what he will of me.

"The Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He seeth the Father do." Here rises up an error of the Arians; but it rises up that it may fall; because it is not humbled, that it may rise. What is it which hath set thee off? Thou wouldest say that the Son is less than the Father. For thou hast heard, "The Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He seeth the Father do." From this thou wouldest have the Son called less; it is this I know, I know it is this hath set thee off; believe that He is not less, thou canst not as yet see it, believe, this is what I was saying a little while ago. "But how," you will say, "am I to believe against His own words?" He saith Himself, "The Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He seeth the Father do." Attend too to that which follows; "For what things soever the Father doeth, the same also doeth the Son likewise;" He did not say, "such things," Beloved, consider a while, that ye cause not confusion to yourselves. There is need of a tranquil heart, a godly and devout faith, a religious earnest attention; attend, not to me the poor vessel, but to Him who putteth the bread in the vessel. Attend then a while. For in all that I have said above in exhorting you to faith, that the mind imbued with faith may be capable of understanding, all that has been said has had a pleasing, glad, anti easy sound, has cheered your minds, ye have followed it, ye have understood what I said. But what I am now about to say I hope there are some who will understand; yet I fear that all will not understand. And seeing that God hath by the lesson of the Gospel proposed to us a subject to speak upon, and we cannot avoid that which the Master hath proposed; I fear lest haply they who will not understand, who perhaps will be the greater number, should think that I have spoken to them in vain; but yet because of those who will understand, I do not speak in vain. Let him who understandeth rejoice, let him who doth not understand bear it patiently; what he doth not understand, let him bear, and that he may understand, let him bear delay.

He doth not say then, "What things soever the Father doeth, such doeth the Son:" as if the Father doeth some things, and the Son others. For it did seem as though He had meant this when He said above, "The Son doeth nothing of Himself, but what He seeth the Father do." Mark; He did not there either say, "But what He heareth the Father enjoin;" but, "what He seeth the Father do." If then we consult the carnal understanding, or sense rather, He hath set before Him as it were two workmen, the Father and the Son, the Father working without seeing any, the Son working from seeing the Father. This is still a carnal view. Nevertheless, in order to understand those things which are higher, let us not decline these lower and mean things. First, let us set something before our eyes in this way; let us suppose there are two workmen, father and son. The father has made a chest, which the son could not make, unless he saw the father making it: he keeps his mind on the chest which the father has made, and makes another chest like it, not the same. I put off for a while the words which follow, and now I ask the Arian; "Dost thou understand it in the sense of this supposition? Hath the Father done something, which when the Son saw Him do. He too hath done something like it? For do the words by which thou art perplexed seem to have this meaning?" Now He doth not say, "The Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He heareth the Father enjoin." But He saith, "The Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He seeth the Father do." See, if thou understand it thus; the Father hath done something, and the Son attendeth that He may see what He Himself too hath to do; and that, some other thing like that which the Father had done. This which the Father hath done, by whom hath He done it? If, not by the Son, if not by the Word, thou hast incurred the charge of blasphemy against the Gospel. "For all things were made by Him." So then what the Father had done, He had done by the Word; if by the Word He had done it, He had done it by the Son. Who then is that other who attends, that He may do some other thing which he seeth the Father do? Ye have not been wont to say that the Father hath two sons: there is One, One Only-Begotten of Him. But through His mercy, Alone as regards His Divinity and not Alone as regards the inheritance. The Father hath made coheirs with His Only Son; not begotten them like Him of His Own Substance, but adopted them by Him out of His Own family. For "we have been called," as Holy Scripture testifieth, "into the adoption of sons."

What then sayest thou? It is the Only Son Himself That speaketh; the Only-Begotten Son speaketh in the Gospel: the Word Himself hath given us the words, we have heard Himself saying, "The Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He seeth the Father do." Now then the Father doeth that the Son may see what to do; and nevertheless the Father doeth nothing but by the Son. Assuredly thou art confused, thou heretic, assuredly thou art confused; but thy confusion is as from taking hellebore, that thou mayest be cured. Even now thou canst not find thine own self, thou dost even thyself condemn thine own judgment and thy carnal view, I think. Put behind thee the eyes of the flesh, raise up what eyes thou hast in thine heart, behold things divine. They are men's words it is true thou hearest, and by a man, by the Evangelist, by the Gospel thou hearest men's words, as a man; but it is of the Word of God thou hearest, that thou mayest hear what is human, come to know what is Divine. The Master hath given trouble, that He might instruct; hath sown a difficulty, that He might excite an earnest attention. "The Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He seeth the Father do." It might follow that He should say, "For what things soever the Father doeth, the like doeth the Son." This He doeth not say; but, "What things soever the Father doeth, the same doeth the Son likewise." The Father doeth not some things, the Son other things; because all things that the Father doeth, He doeth by the Son. The Son raised Lazarus; did not the Father raise him? The Son gave sight to the blind man; did not the Father give him sight? The Father by the Son in the Holy Ghost. It is the Trinity; but the Operation of the Trinity is One, the Majesty One, the Eternity One, the Coeternity One, and the Works the Same. The Father doeth not create some men, the Son others, the Holy Ghost others; the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost create one and the same man; and the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost, One God, createth him.

You observe a Plurality of Persons, but acknowledge the Unity of the Divinity. For because of the Plurality of Persons it was said, "Let Us make man after Our image and likeness." He did not say, "I will make man, and do Thou attend when I am making him, that Thou too mayest be able to make another." "Let Us make," He saith; I hear the Plurality; "after Our image;" again I hear the Plurality. Where then is the Singularity of the Divinity? Read what follows, "And God made man." It is said, "Let Us make man;" and it is not said, "The Gods made man." The Unity is understood in that it was said, "God made man."

Where then is that carnal view? Be it confounded, hidden, brought to nought; let the Word of God speak to us. Even now as godly men, as believing already, as already imbued with faith, and having gotten some attainment of understanding, turn we to the Word Himself, to the Fountain of light, and let us say together, "O Lord, the Father doeth ever the same things as Thou; for that whatsoever the Father doeth, by Thee He doeth it. We have heard that Thou art the Word in the beginning; we have not seen, but believed. There too have we heard what follows, that 'all things were made by Thee.' All things then that the Father doeth, He doeth by Thee. Therefore Thou doest the same things as the Father. Why then didst Thou wish to say, 'The Son can do nothing of Himself'? For I see a certain equality in Thee with the Father, in that I hear, 'What things soever the Father doeth, the same doeth the Son;' I recognise an equality, hereby I understand, and comprehend as far as I am able, 'I and My Father are One.' What meaneth it, that Thou canst do nothing, but what Thou seest the Father do? What meaneth this?"

Peradventure He would say to me, yea say to us all: "Now as to this that I have said, 'The Son can do nothing, but what He seeth the Father do;'"

My 'Seeing' how dost thou understand? My 'Seeing,' what is it? Put aside for a while the form of the servant which He took for thy sake. For in that servant's form our Lord had eyes and ears in the Flesh, and that human form was the same figure of a Body, such as we bear, the same outlines of members.

That Flesh had come from Adam: but He was not as Adam. So then the Lord walking whether on the earth or in the sea, as it pleased Him, as He would, for whatever He would, He could; looked at what He would; He fixed His eyes, He saw; He turned away His eyes, and did not see; who followed was behind Him, whoso could be seen, before Him; with the eyes of His Body, He saw only what was before Him. But from His Divinity nothing was hid. Put aside, put aside, I say, for a while the form of the servant, look at the Form of God in which He was before the world was made; in which He was equal to the Father; hereby receive and understand what He saith to thee, 'Who being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God. There see Him if thou canst, that thou mayest be able to see what His 'Seeing' is." "In the beginning was the Word." How doth the Word see? Hath the Word eyes, or are our eyes found in Him, the eyes not of the flesh, but the eyes of godly hearts? For, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."

Christ thou seest Man and God; He doth manifest to thee the Man, God He reserveth for thee. Now see how He reserveth God for thee, who doth manifest Himself to thee as Man. "Whoso loveth Me," saith He, "keepeth My commandments; whoso loveth Me shall be loved of My Father, and I will love him." And as if it were asked, "What wilt Thou give to him whom Thou lovest?" "And I will manifest Myself," saith He, "to him." What meaneth this, Brethren? He whom they saw already, promised that He would manifest Himself to them. To whom?

Those by whom He was seen, or those also by whom He was not seen? Thus speaking to a certain Apostle, who asked to see the Father, that it might suffice him, and said, "Show us the Father, and it sufficeth us"--Then He standing before this servant's eyes, in the form of a servant, reserving for his eyes when deified the Form of God, saith to him, "Have I been so long time with you, and have ye not known Me? He that seeth Me, seeth the Father also." Thou askest to see the Father; see Me, thou seest Me, and dost not see Me. Thou seest what for thee I bare assumed, thou dost not see What I have reserved for thee. Give ear to My commandments, purify thine eyes. "For whoso loveth Me, keepeth My commandments, and I will love him." To him as keeping My commandments, and by My commandments made whole will I manifest Myself.

If then, Brethren, we are not able to see what the "Seeing" of the Word is, whither are we going? what Vision it may be with too great haste are we requiring? why are we wishing to have shown us what we are not able to see? These things accordingly are spoken of which we desire to see, not as what we are able already to comprehend. For if thou seest the "Seeing of the Word, peradventure in that thou seest the "Seeing of the Word, thou wilt see the Word Himself; that the Word may not be one thing, the "Seeing" of the Word another, lest there be Therein anything joined, and coupled, and double, and compacted. For It is something Simple, of a Simplicity ineffable. Not as with a man, the man is one thin, the man's seeing another. For sometimes a man's seeing is extinguished, and the man remains. This it is of which I said that I was about to say something which all would not be able to understand; the Lord even grant that some may have understood. My Brethren, to this end doth He exhort us, that we may see, that the "Seeing" of the Word is beyond our powers; for they are small; be they nourished, perfected. Whereby By the commandments. What commandments "He that loveth Me, keepeth My commandments. " What commandments? For already do we wish to increase, to be strengthened, perfected, that we may see the "Seeing" of the Word. Tell us, Lord, now what commandments? "A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another." This charity then, Brethren, let us draw from the plentifulness of the Fountain, let us receive it; be nourished by it. Receive thou that whereby thou mayest be able to receive. Let charity give thee birth, let charity nourish thee; charity bring thee to perfection, charity strengthen thee; that thou

mayest see this "Seeing" of the Word, that the Word is not one thing and His "Seeing" another, but that the "Seeing" of the Word is the Very Word Himself; and so perhaps thou wilt soon understand that that which is said, "The Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He seeth the Father do," is as if He had said, "The Son would not be, if He had not been born of the Father." Let this suffice, Brethren; I know that I have said that which perhaps, if meditated upon, may develop itself to many, which oftentimes when expressed in words may chance to be obscured.

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