

# LESSONS IN LIVING

*Series:*  
*Self-Defense from a Fundamentalist Attack*  
*Part 4: Love Fulfills the Law*

A St. Andrew's Sermon  
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby  
September 26, 2010

Scripture Readings: I John 4:7-16; Galatians 5:1-6 (*Inclusive Bible*)

Now we're going to be looking at a mystical scripture. The Gospel of John, and the letters of John are mystical literature, which is very hard for us to hear. In the first service, about 1/3 of the people were just sitting there with their eyes wide open and leaning forward, about 1/3 of them were just acting normal, and then about 1/3 of them were clearly "checked out" to the point of a couple of them going to sleep. (*laughter*) I don't take that personally. This is kind of a warning, a caveat. Mystical literature is very hard to take in, particularly for somebody raised in this culture where you have defenses to protect you from the insights of a religion based on love. If you're raised on a religion based on fear – even if it's carefully disguised by liberal words, in other words, if your religion has "Hell" in it anywhere, then that is the energy that has driven your life, assuming you believe any of it. But if religion is that by which you organize your life, and there is an element of fear at the heart of it, then the religion of love is very hard to hear, because the religion of love tries to motivate you with a positive goal. In a religion of fear, you're trying to get away from something.

Most people that were raised with a religion of fear really don't have a very clear idea of God at all. They don't have a very clear idea of Heaven at all either, but they know what Hell looks like. They know what the little demons with the forks look like, and they don't want to go there. So what we're trying to do is understand these scriptures, not the 2,000 years of distortion that have been cast upon them, but in the original vocabulary in which they were spoken.

Now when somebody says that religion is fulfilled by love – that if you love, you have fulfilled everything that religion requires of you, it drives some preachers crazy. To say that God is love is the ultimate challenge to the religions of fear. And it isn't too hard to see places in the Bible where God isn't very loving. When the Israelites are going through the desert, they're starving, they're afraid, they don't know what is going on, and they complain, and what does God do? Instead of God making bread, God makes poisonous snakes to punish them for grumbling. God could have made Hostess treats – would have been easier, but no, venomous snakes. Somebody went through and counted one time and counted the number of times Satan killed people in the Bible, versus the times God killed people in the Bible. According to this person, Satan only

killed 10 people in scripture, whereas, God killed more than Two Million. Now I don't know how they counted it. Maybe they weren't a fan [of God's]. (*laughter*)

But even in our own lives, the symbol that "God is love" doesn't explain all of our experiences. Things happens that a loving person wouldn't do to us. Instead, what the symbol is trying to say is when we love, we open ourselves to the sacred to the full extent that we are capable. So it's not really talking about what God feels like up in heaven - what are the glands doing inside of the sacred body? What does it feel like to be God? It's saying instead that when we are loving, we open ourselves to the Divine.

Now the reason I shifted to the first scripture is that I know when it says that Jesus is the Only Begotten One, we need to stop and explain that. That does not sound like the religion of love. The idea that God sent one beloved child to one group of people, and the rest of us have to convert to that creates a little tension in that idea that God is love. If God is willing to let most of humankind go to Hell and be tortured...well, it kind of dents that "nice guy" image a little bit. If there is a Hell, then we're not talking about a loving God, and we're not even talking about a sane God. If there is a Hell, then we're talking about a crazy Deity. And there's really no point in going very far down that road, because at some point, you're going to blow it. If God is that crazy, what makes you think that if you get to Heaven, you're not going to blow it there. What makes you think that God isn't going to look at you over your harp and say "I know what you're thinking!" "That's it, get out of here!" Only a God of love can give us peace. Only a God of love can motivate us to our best self and our best lives. Simply being afraid of punishment is not the same motivation as wanting to share and make people happy. So, we're trying to look at reorienting not only our philosophy and our theology, but our lives themselves, because that's what it comes down to.

Now what I'm hoping to do is lift up the same type of poetry from other religions. That idea that God is a parent, and that Jesus is the only child of God is a very ancient poem. What it's really talking about is a human being in the Universe, and it's using our personal relationships to help us feel our connections to our Source and to who we deeply are.

I want to start with a reading from Buddhism which is using the much the same imagery. But it comes from the Bodisatva. The Bodisatva is a Buddha who is so compassionate that instead of entering into enlightenment, that Buddha says if there are other beings not enlightened, I refuse to go into Nirvana, I will stay and teach and comfort people. I once had a Buddhist professor say to me "if you Christians were really serious about loving God, you would refuse to go to heaven and go down to Hell to serve where the need is. Makes sense, doesn't it? And that's why in the Apostle's Creed Jesus doesn't shoot straight to heaven, but descends to Hell because that's what love would do. But listen to this:

*The Bodisatva, the greatest being, compassion embodied, having practiced compassion, sympathy and joy, attains the stage of the best-loved, only child. For example, the father and mother greatly rejoice to see their child at peace. The same is the case for the Bodisatva who abides in this stage. He or she sees all beings just as the parents see their only child. A child picks up earth, dirty things, old bones, pieces of wood and puts them*

*in his or her mouth. At which, the father and mother, afraid of the harms that might arise thereby, take the child with the left hand, and with the right hand takes these out. The same goes with the Bodisatva, who sees all beings are not grown up to the stage of the law body, the Bodisatva sees with the hand of wisdom and extracts that which harms them.*

I'm hoping that example from another religion will help us to see that it's talking about a type of love. A parent loves each child as an only child. That's one type of love, and if you didn't receive that, I'm sorry for you. Because that's one type of love the heart needs. If your parents only loved you generically, just as a kind of club, and everybody was the same – one size fits all, there are parts of your heart that haven't been fed yet. And these symbols are intended to reveal those parts of your heart, and to feed them.

This is from Hinduism:

*Love is the first born, loftier than the gods, the ancestors and the rest of humankind. You owe love for the eldest of all altogether mighty. To you we pay homage. In many a form of goodness, O love, you show your face. Grant that these forms may penetrate within our hearts.*

This is exactly what John is saying. Let me read that again.

*In many a form of goodness, O love, you show your face. Grant that these forms may penetrate within our hearts.*

John is saying that no one has ever seen God. (That's right there in the Bible...so all the people that say they have seen God - that God talks to them – all that stuff is in disagreement with what John is saying.)

What John says is that human beings, the children of God, represent the face of God. So, when Jesus says "I am the way, I am the only born," that word is *one* word in Greek, and it probably could be better translated as "unique." In fact, the International Standard Version now translates that "unique," and the NASV translation now has that as a sub text. It's not really talking about genetics. It's talking about the kind of love that loves a person for who they are, and Jesus represents that kind of love, so that we can discover it and find it and live it out.

So, on the one hand, it says, "I am the way and nobody comes to God except through me." The second part of that equation is what? "What you do to the least of these, you do to me." Which is why, then, John says, "Whoever loves is begotten of God." That would be a direct contradiction if it weren't a mystical poem. Do you see that? If Jesus is the only begotten, and then a couple of lines down it says, "Anyone who loves is begotten," you understand you are talking about a poem, a spiritual poem that teaches you who you are in the Universe. You come from a Source, you're shining out of it. You can't find it, taste it, touch it, but you're an expression of it, and when you look at the person sitting next to you, you're peering deeply into that same Source. No one has seen God. It's not that we love God, John says, but that we love each other. That God has loved us, and when we love each other, then we feel that.

It's pretty hard to find something that is everywhere. If the sacred is everywhere, how do you find it as opposed to something else? It's kind of hard to love something that's invisible,

ineffable. You may want to love it, but when you take Hell out of the equation, there's kind of a slack that sets in. There was a child who was very afraid of a thunderstorm and the parent came in and said "God is everywhere, God is with you, go to sleep." And the child says "I know that God is everywhere, but right now, I need someone with skin!" That's what John is talking about in the Incarnation...that Jesus puts skin on the love, and lives it out and teaches us how to do the same thing. But if you think that Jesus is the only begotten child of God, you don't realize that the whole point of it is for you to be the love in skin that other people need.

Let me ask you a question. If God was in Hell – if the equation was reversed, if by loving God you went to Hell, and loving Satan you went to Heaven, which would you choose? That sort of shows through the idea that we love God, right? I mean, if God is in Heaven, then what we really love is Heaven. One of the things you may notice about this particular world – the afterlife may be different, but in this world, if you love the sacred it exposes you to Hell sometimes a lot more than the other way around. And if you're willing to sell out humankind, a lot of times you get a lot of "perks" that feel like Heaven for a little while.

What would your religion be like if it were motivated by love and you completely took fear out of it? John says love casts out fear. What would religion be like if we took that out? According to John, we would see each other as the sacred that we're searching for. We would stop looking for God, and would find God in the person sitting next to us.

The best summary, I think, of this statement of John, outside of the Christian tradition, and maybe even within it, comes from the Bhagavad Gita of Hinduism. Listen to this. It is what John is saying in a nutshell:

*I am ever present unto those who have realized me in every creature. Seeing all of life  
As my manifestation, they are never separated from me. They worship me in the hearts  
Of all, and all their actions proceed from me. Wherever they may live, they abide in me.  
(That's almost the same words)*

The Old Testament uses the "only begotten" to talk about Isaac. Do you remember that Isaac is the son of Abraham that is going to be sacrificed? Abraham is willing to sacrifice the only begotten son. But there's more children...it's not just Isaac. There's Esau, too. So that word is not to be taken literally. A human being is a unique phenomenon in the Universe. Our consciousness is a miracle, and the ancients knew that, and they wrote poems about the only child of God. Human consciousness is the only place where the intelligence of God becomes manifest. But what John did was take it a step further. When in your human life, you feel that...when you love, you become something more. You become the begotten child of God.

The symbol of the Trinity and these stories from the Gospels are ways of making visible and putting into story form the truth of who you are...deeply, profoundly. When John says that God is love, what it's saying is "the Universe is your parent." Maybe there's a person on the other side of that. But there's definitely something personal. You relate to it. You are emanating from it. And when you feel alone, John says don't go looking for your Source... don't think you're going to find that which is willing you into existence. Instead, turn to the person next to

you and look into their eyes, and you will see the very heart of the Universe. And you will know who you are – the only child of God...and so is everyone else.

*Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.*

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