

The Lord Alone
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Scripture: Deuteronomy 6:4-9; 11:13-21

At the start of this series, I suggested that when Jesus says in John 14:6 that “*I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me*” he does not mean that only his followers have any connection with God. Rather, Jesus is referring to a Way of Life that connects us with God. Specifically, a Way of Life that he taught, embodied, and died for. I called this a “4G” Way of Life that connects us to a “5G” God.

To refresh your memory, the 4G’s are the 3 **G**reat Loves (Love of God, Neighbor, and Self) + **G**race. Any path, in or outside of any religious tradition or system, that practices Love of God, Neighbor, and Self, and actively gives and receives Grace, is a path that connects us to God. Those who practice a “4G” Way of Life, yet are not followers of Jesus, are the “other sheep” Jesus says are his own but are “not of this fold.” (John 10:16)

The 5th “G” stands for **G**reat Awakening. You could also call it Conversion, or Enlightenment, or a “Born Again” experience, or as John Wesley called it, a “heart strangely warmed.”

This Awakening is often what puts us on the “4G” path to begin with. Something happens that convinces us that life is a lot more than it appears; that there is an invisible consciousness, that many name “God”; and that this consciousness somehow, inexplicably loves us beyond all imagining. It is this kind of experience, or some variation of it, that first connects us with God. Then, we *maintain* this connection through practicing a “4G” Way of Life.

Proof that other religions have arisen in response to God establishing a connection with their founders is that, in one form or another, those founders practiced and taught a “4G” Way of Life once they were awakened, just as Jesus did. They had different ways of conceiving what love of God, neighbor, and self looks like, and different understandings of how grace works, yet they were clearly responding to an experience of the Divine that was real, and maintained the connection in a “4G” way.

As I’ve mentioned before, any path that practices a 4G Way of Life is like a path up a great mountain. Further down on the mountain, the paths may be quite different. They may even be on opposite sides of the mountain. Yet, as the mystical traditions of every major faith have known, at their highest level of realization, each path shows itself to be headed to the same place.

I first heard this analogy in 2004, offered by Father John Martin, abbot of a Shantivanam Ashram – a Benedictine monastery in India whose purpose is to explore the relationships between Christianity and Eastern religion. I find it quite helpful, as it helps us avoid the trap of dumbing down religions with claims that “they all teach the same thing,” or “they’re all the same path.” They are not the same path. And they teach very different ways to respond to the grace and love that sets them on the path to begin with.

For instance, Western religions tend to respond to God's love and grace by emphasizing radical engagement with the world. Eastern Religions tend to respond to God's love and grace by emphasizing radical disengagement from the world and its many entanglements. Yet, though they respond differently to God's love and grace, and conceive of God differently, Eastern and Western religions all tend to advocate some form of loving God, neighbor, and self, and the giving and receiving of grace.

This morning, I want to focus our attention of the first "G" in this "4G" way of life: That is, loving God. What does it mean to love God in the way Jesus meant it?

When Jesus was asked what the most important commandment of all was, he did not say it was to simply "love God," but to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. This is what the first "G" actually means – a total love. Then, Jesus said there is another command that is like it – to love our neighbor as ourselves. Here, Jesus identifies the 2nd and 3rd "G"s, citing a commandment from the Book of Leviticus. The commandment about loving God is found in Deuteronomy 6:4 and is commonly considered the most important commandment in the entire Hebrew Bible

This commandment is considered so important that it is literally mounted to the doorpost of every house of every observant Jew, in a small, narrow box called a Mezuzah. If you've ever been to a Jewish home, perhaps you've seen one. You'll find it on the upper third of the right doorpost, affixed with its top angled toward the inside.

Within the Mezuzah is a small piece of parchment, handwritten in Hebrew by a special scribe, containing the words of Deuteronomy 6:4-9, and Deuteronomy 11:13-21. The first scripture contains the command to love God with all our whole selves. The second describes the blessings that are promised when we do so.

Given that loving God with heart, mind, soul, and strength is so central to the Jewish faith, one might find it surprising that they would find it necessary to be reminded of it so often. Yet really, we should be more surprised that we Christians we don't have Mezuzah's on our doorposts. I mean, have you ever tried loving God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength? I don't mean this figuratively. I mean, have you literally tried loving God this way? How long does it take before you yourself need a reminder?

Perhaps we Christians don't have Mezuzahs outside our doorways because we do not believe in a God who is worthy of such love to begin with.

I don't say this flippantly. Nor am I trying to criticize your beliefs, or lack of belief. I just think that it is hard to truly and fully love a God we do not believe truly or fully loves us. While many Christians proclaim a God of love, far fewer actually act like such a God exists. If we did, our entire society would be run extremely differently than it is now.

One reason many Christians question God's love has to do with human suffering. While faithful people throughout the ages have wrestled with the problem of evil and suffering, some of us in the modern world seem to feel we have uniquely found the answer: If God exists, God is either uncaring, or unqualified to be God.

Yet a deeper reason exists for our doubts about God's love. After 30 years of ministry, I have found that most people struggle with some very negative tapes running through their heads. Tapes that say, "You're not good enough." "You'll never amount to anything." "You're a real disappointment." "You're a fraud." Other tapes play similar claims about our neighbors. These tapes play so frequently, repeating themselves so much, that it is hard not to associate these thoughts with God. It is hard to truly and fully love a God who you do not believe truly and fully loves you.

If you are one of the 90% who acknowledge they struggle with such voices in their heads, or one of the 10% who lie or are in denial, I invite you to consider the following proposal:

*If you knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that the real God
loves you far more deeply than your ability to comprehend,
believes in you far more deeply than you believe in yourself – and
loves all others this way as well –
would you bow down to this God?*

*If you knew that this God, the real God,
has no "anger management" issues with you regarding your shortcomings –
or anyone else's shortcomings –
but is more like a caring friend who steadfastly stands with us
even while prodding us to become
the best version of ourselves that we can possibly be,
would you bow before this God?
Would you entrust your life into this God's hands?*

*If so, why not turn aside from those other gods
that keep demanding your loyalty and try it?
Tell God, "If this is who you really are,
then I'm yours.
And if you guide me,
I'll follow."*

Okay, this is a little more than a proposal. This morning, I challenge you to surrender your life, your loyalty, and your love to God. I'm not challenging you to surrender to *my* God. My hope is that you will surrender – fully and completely – to *your* God, if you have not done so already. I hope you will surrender to whatever form of God you feel that, if this God is real, you would gladly turn your life over to.

The God I have just identified is the one I consider to be real. In my experience, the real God – whom I also believe to be the God of Jesus – loves me beyond my wildest imagination. This love very much includes goading and prodding me to live into the best version of myself – sometimes gently, as with a shepherd's crook, and sometimes with an iron rod – yet this God would never, ever, throw me into an eternal torture chamber if I didn't live up to God's highest vision for me. This is the real God – who is also the God of Jesus.

The real God not only loves me in this way, but loves you this way too – you and all people, without a single exception. In fact, if God loved me so fully, but not you, I would not believe this to be the God of Jesus, nor would I find such a God worth bowing down to. I refuse to bow before a God who may not have “anger management” issues with me, but does have them with everyone else; or a God who would remain with me in some way long after I die, but would consign you, or others, to the eternal fires of hell.

Of course, not all Christians believe in the God of Jesus this way. Yet, since I’m the one preaching this morning, it’s my job to describe the God of Jesus as best I am able. There are plenty of other preachers you can turn to if you prefer to surrender your life, your love, and your hopes to a God who only lets Christians into heaven (or just certain Christians), while everyone else is tortured for eternity.

If you happen to be one of these Christians who cannot conceive of God who would love and save all of God’s children, I want to make one thing clear. I do not consider you to be unfaithful, or unloved by God. And I must acknowledge that, as an imperfect human being, I may be wrong and you may be right when it comes to God. The only thing I ask of you this morning – besides hearing me out – is that you ask yourself two questions:

First, will you ever be able to enjoy or appreciate the kind of “heaven” you envision if, for the rest of eternity, you are aware that, while you experience Paradise, people you know and love are burning in hellfire, each and every second, without any hope of ever being released? I don’t know about you, but my definition of Hell would be existing in a place for all of eternity with people who are not the slightest bit concerned about the hardship of others, much less their torment and torture.

My second question is: Do you really think you can bow down fully to a God who would torture people you know and love for eternity? I mean, even if you could move beyond resenting such a God, how can you be so sure that you won’t suffer the same fate as others? Like me, you are an imperfect human being. So you can’t be sure. You may consider yourself to be a shoe-in for heaven, but what if you’ve overestimated yourself?

What if God looks at your bank account to see exactly where you invest the many resources God has blessed you with? Or your calendar to see where you invest your time and attention? What if God looks into all the ways you’ve treated others to see if you are really “loving your neighbor as yourself,” or “loving your enemies,” as Jesus commanded?

The point I am trying to make with these questions is that it is impossible to bow fully to a God you believe will eventually be torturing your friends and loved ones. It is also hard surrender yourself completely into God’s hands if you believe there is at least a small possibility that those hands may cast you into hell, too.

So, if the torturing God is the real God, then let’s hope that none of us actually believes in this God. For, if surrendering fully and completely to such a God is a requirement for salvation, then none of us are likely going to heaven in the end.

Of course, as I have acknowledged, the God I believe in may not, in fact, be the real God. If this is the case, then I hope that, rather than throwing me into hell when I die, the torturing God

will at least recognize that those of us who do not choose to serve a torturing God have at least found some form of God that we can truly love with heart, mind, soul, and strength, and serve enthusiastically. Since even the torturing God whom proclaim is also supposedly a loving God, then hopefully loving and serving the loving side of God counts for something, even if some of us neither love nor serve the torturing side of God.

This is the inner calculation I have made, anyway. It is one I am at peace with, even if I am wrong about God. And, as little as I can claim to know about God, my direct experience of God tells me I am not wrong about God in the slightest – at least not in this way.

In my experience, however, many people – even people who believe that God probably doesn't torture people for eternity – feel it is safer to make the opposite calculation. They make some version of Pascal's Wager. They feel it is safer to love and serve a God who might just damn some people to hell for eternity and be proven wrong than to love and serve a God whose intention is to save everyone from eternal hell and be proven wrong.

If you have made such a calculation yourself, let me advise you to be very careful about the kind of God you bow down to. You may think you are just “playing it safe,” but in my experience, it loving a God who is not entirely loving usually introduces the very hell one fears into the world in some way. I know this, because I have not always believed what I do now. When I believed in a God who would throw non-believers into hell, I found that my love for God was not based on true love, but fear. This fear did no favors for either me or the people I so urgently wanted to “save.” Half the time, I harbored doubts that I myself would make it into heaven, and thus tried more and more urgently to save myself through my works, rather than faith. The other half of the time, I was so worried about others not making it that all I could see was God's anger and wrath toward non-believers rather than God's love and grace.

In other words, “playing it safe” made it nearly impossible for me to practice the “4G” Way of Life that Jesus says connects us to God to begin with. How about you?

Now that I've said what is fully on my heart to tell you this morning, I also want to say that, if you honestly feel like you can love God with heart, soul, mind, and strength more fully if God offers salvation to some and eternal damnation to others, then by all means, do so. I believe there are many paths up God's mountain. If should reach the top one day, I fully expect see all kinds of Christians up there – not just “my” kind.

The key for any for us is to allow the “5G” God of “Great Awakenings” continue to transform us, day by day; stirring our souls until, at last, we truly love the God of Jesus with all our heart, all our soul, all our mind, and all our strength; until we love our neighbor fully even as we fully love ourselves; until we give grace away to others as readily as we receive it from a God. In other words, until the God who loves us beyond our wildest imagination transforms us to the point where we love God back, beyond our wildest imagination.