

God of Law or God of Love?
Isaiah 42: 1-9 - Acts 10: 34-43

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The lessons appointed for this day to some degree provide us with two aspects of Christianity. Isaiah reminds us of the sending out of one who will bring justice to the earth, to open eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. Though the prophet Isaiah, like the other writers of the Bible uses language in a poetic sense, replete with many layers of meaning, the release of prisoners and salve to the suffering in this passage seems to be a literal meaning that the chosen one will be a bring justice and comfort to all the nations.

The writer of Acts, who is also probably the author of the Gospel of Luke, has a different theological perspective. He says that Jesus of Nazareth was anointed with the holy spirit and with power, “went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.” Acts reminds us that Jesus is to be the “judge of the living and the dead” It also states that everyone who believes in him “receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

These two lessons present very different theological images. One is of a God who takes his people by the hand, heals the sick, frees the oppressed. The other is of God’s anointed who judges people and has set a formula for the forgiveness of sins, who is in competition with a literal devil for the souls of the chosen ones. In essence, the lessons are the two sides of religion which have come into conflict, often armed conflict, over the course of the past thirty years. This conflict is one which transcends the differences in major world religions. Today I will speak to you about fundamentalism and hopefully help you understand why subjects as different as the bombing of the World Trade Center, Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, the explosion of nuclear weapons in India and Pakistan, and the Taliban, are connected and not separate entities and events.

“Fundamentalism” is a word so bandied about by the media that it loses its original meanings. Yet, each of us thinks that he or she knows what the word means. In his book entitled *Stealing Jesus: How Fundamentalism Betrays Christianity*, Bruce Bawer makes a distinction which is helpful for me. He writes that the major difference between Christian camps is not best understood as conservative and liberal. Those are political terms which may or may not apply to the religious arena. In fact, one might be politically conservative and religiously tolerant and open-minded. My own paternal grandfather, by contrast is extremely religiously zealous about a narrow theological perspective. He is convinced that only people who believe exactly as he does will go to heaven. Breaking a common stereotype though, he is politically more liberal than I am.

So if the terms liberal and conservative are not helpful in the discussion of religious differences, how does one characterize the distinctions? Bawer divides the religious world into two groups—legalistic and nonlegalistic religion.

Legalistic religion worships the God of Law who presents his people with divine rules and formulas, given through prophets and seers. In legalistic religion the God of Law rewards those elect individuals who resist the temptations of demons by maintaining a perspective which divides the world into saved and unsaved, good and evil. When those who worship the God of Law see the inconsistencies in their strict doctrines and dogmas they are conditioned to believe that the source of their doubt is temptation from Satan. Legalistic religion does not broach differences of opinion, sees no shades of gray, does not encompass the ability of people worshipping together who believe differently.

The forces that create Pat Robertson and Osama bin Laden have been with us for a long time. In the late nineteenth century the Protestant world struggled with the implications of Darwinism and the change in society from an agrarian community to industrialized state. The churches of the mainline, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Methodist, Congregationalist, Lutheran, etc., encompassed both legalistic and nonlegalistic Protestants. The struggles between the two camps in every denomination were present but they did not split them. A common history was strong enough to keep everyone in the "big tent" of the mainline churches. Groups within the mainline Protestant churches formed but they had no catalyst to trigger their conflict. Particular mainline congregations became known for being more moderate, others had stricter pastors.

Then, the world changed in the late nineteen fifties and into the nineteen sixties middle-class women began to assert their identities and seek lives outside the home. They entered the workplace, entered professions previously unimaginable. I can still remember the days of my boyhood when we children would ask each other if there were jobs women could not do. Such a question, I imagine, would be unthinkable to children growing up today.

Later other groups in society followed the women's liberation movement and they too sought recognition and their rights. African-Americans, gays and lesbians, the handicapped and many other groups sought a more just and equitable society. Additionally, ecumenism and the interfaith movements encouraged dialogue between religions following the disaster of the Holocaust.

For the nonlegalistic religious people who worshiped the God of Love, these societal changes presented a necessary challenge. Though they might not feel comfortable with all the changes initially, they tried to adapt to the idea of women in ministry, and accepted open gays and lesbians in their churches. The nonlegalistic religious believed that since all were children of God that they should endeavor to understand people in other religions as well. For the legalistic religious the law was always the law. It is interesting to note that the legalistic and nonlegalistic religious perspective is found in every world religion with legalistic Jews, legalistic Christians, legalistic Hindus and legalistic Moslems all being opposed absolutely to the changing roles of women in society, believing that such violates the God's law. It is important to note that regardless of their faith, those of the legalistic religious bent believe that those in other religious groups are demonic. Evangelical Protestants in this country view those outside their communities as unholy other. The al-Qaeda, under Osama bin Laden, view those not of their brand of legalistic Islam as satanic. The Hindu legalists in the the Indian government believe that the Moslems in neighboring Pakistan are basically evil. The legalistic Islamic Taliban who ruled Afghanistan made it a crime for any other religion to be preached in their nation and they destroyed any cultural artifacts representing any religion other than Islam.

This perspective is an element of every religion. Every mainline Christian denomination has a legalistic faction and a nonlegalistic faction. In the Roman Catholic church both factions are also present with Cardinal Ratzinger in the Vatican upholding church dogma and condemning ecumenical efforts, and the late Cardinal Bernardin in Chicago reaching out to many religious groups, being de facto the religious leader for that city.

Our congregation stands at an extreme in this matter. There is no question in the Unitarian Universalist Association about which God our body worships, if we can all be said to be worshiping a God. We worship the God of Love. Yes, I know that in our tolerant church it is difficult to say that we are all united in any belief. Yet, the fact that we travel with people of different faith positions in the same community means to me that it is not only the law which we obey but the calling of our hearts. Unitarians in the nineteenth century affirmed that a loving deity gave them minds to think. The Universalists believed in a God who would not condemn anyone to eternal torment. They also broke the rules and were the first to ordain women to their ministry. The Unitarians,

Universalists and the Quakers represent religious movements which have never believed in the God of Law. That makes our denomination different, we have never been founded upon notions of sin and fear of God's wrath. They are concepts antithetical to our tradition and always have been.

Ironically, in regards to history, the legalistic Protestants of the religious right love to quote from the founding fathers of this land to back up their own version of reality. If you watch television programs like "The 700 Club" or Jerry Falwell's broadcasts you would assume that the men who wrote the United States constitution were religious legalists like themselves. They love to quote Washington or Franklin or Jefferson to make their point. Yet, they always neglect to mention that those men, though all Christians, were all nonlegalistic Christians—people like you and me—people who the religious right in this country do not consider Christians. George Washington was an Episcopalian and a very open-minded one. Benjamin Franklin was a Quaker who believed that God's light shone in all people, not just the chosen few. Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, though political enemies, were both Unitarians. Ultimately the reason that the United States constitution does not establish any religion is that the men of nonlegalistic faith who were seated at the table believed that every person should find God for himself. They believed that this was the attitude that Jesus preached.

If you read the gospels telling the story of Jesus and compare them to the ten commandments, you will find that there exists a dichotomy. Jesus consistently breaks some of the ten commandments as they were understood in his lifetime. He often does not honor his mother and his father. Once when he is told that his mother wants to speak to him in the hallway he turns to his disciples and tells them that they are his real family. When they are traveling on a Sabbath he and the disciples pick food to eat and are condemned for breaking the prohibition against working on the Sabbath. Jesus responds that the Sabbath was made for man and man was not made for the Sabbath. Many similar examples of Jesus' behavior exist. He often broke the rules.

Why did he do it? Jesus wanted the Israelites of his day to know that it was not the following of rules which sanctified their lives. He associated with tax collectors and prostitutes. He spoke to women as equals. He saw the good in those who were considered untouchable. I believe that the God of Love, who Jesus followed, did not divide the world into clean and unclean, saint and sinner, kosher and unkosher. Jesus rebelled against the legalisms of his day. When asked by a lawyer which one of the laws, meaning the ten commandments, was most important, Jesus faced a potential problem. If he named one law above the others then he would almost certainly face a rhetorical backlash. A good lawyer can argue anything. Instead, he ignored the specifics of the question and replied that the foundation of the law was that one love God with all thy heart and soul and love thy neighbor as thyself. This was not the legalistic answer which the lawyer expected and he was not prepared to debate Jesus. Jesus supported the ten commandments and refuted them at the same time. Jesus expressed a faith in something greater than law—the spirit behind the law, which he described as the kingdom of heaven.

In truth though, religious legalists and religious nonlegalists quote scripture to their own advantage. As the scripture we read today demonstrates, both the God of Love and the God of Law are always with us. The advantage in any debate only from the perspective of rhetorical logic, has to be given to the religious legalists. This is because the methods of debate and argument favors those who proof text. It is the nature of debating skills.

Additionally the religious legalists in our country have an ally in the media. Notice what happens when Pat Robertson or Jerry Falwell state authoritatively into a camera that Christians believe something. What then happens? Does the camera then revert to an Episcopal bishop or a United Church of Christ minister or Unitarian Universalist minister refuting what was just said? Of course not, that is not opposite enough to be controversial. Instead, the media then turns to some university professor or lawyer to respond to Falwell or Robertson. They do not turn to other nonlegalistic Christians to respond to Christian fundamentalism. This means that Falwell

and Robertson are assumed to represent the Christian community. They are given possession of the word “Christian” without question and the tacit assumption by the media that they genuinely represent what Christians believe--when in fact Christians believe a wide range of opinions on any given issue.

The future though does not belong to the religious legalists of any faith, regardless of how powerful they might become, because the religious nonlegalists have a great advantage—they are willing to speak to each other. You see, some Roman Catholic priests are willing to engage in dialogue with Protestants. Some Christians engage in dialogue with nonlegalistic Jews. Some Jews will speak with nonlegalistic Moslems and some nonlegalistic Moslems will speak with Buddhists. In so doing these people are following a religion based upon love and not law. Though the cause of love often falters, it does not fail. It prevails unto the end.

In the early nineteenth century in the United States a debate raged upon the legitimacy of slavery from a religious perspective. In Boston in the early nineteenth century the leading Unitarian minister of the day, William Ellery Channing, was invited to debate the subject of slavery. The first person to speak at the debate stood up and quoted ad nauseum scriptural citations which supported slavery. When he was finished William Ellery Channing stood up, approached the podium, and conceded in his speech that the Bible contained scripture which could be construed to condone the enslavement of human beings into cruel bondage. Channing conceded that those passages of scripture did exist. However, Channing replied, despite its legalistic parts, the spirit of the Bible was ultimately a story of love and liberation--and against such a spirit slavery could not stand.

We are challenged at all times to live in the spirit of love and liberation. The God of Law is easier. You know exactly what is expected. Living with the God of Love requires one to think about things more deeply and to question the mores of our times.

Today I have told you about legalistic and nonlegalistic religion. I hope that you have not had to agonize in your own life about your faith. The fact that you are here today probably means that in your spiritual journey you asked questions and considered the answers. I know that the God of Love was ultimately the one you must have felt in your soul.

Such a spiritual journey occurred to Huckleberry Finn in Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. In the story, recounted in Bawer’s book, *Stealing Jesus*, Huck realizes that he is guilty of helping Miss Watson’s slave Jim escape and has therefore, been guilty of theft. He believes in the religious law stating that theft is a mortal sin worthy of punishment in hell. He decides that in order to get right with God and avoid eternal punishment, that he must write a letter to Miss Watson telling her where Jim is hiding. He does so and feels clean and washed of sin. But before posting the letter, Huck thinks of Jim and thinks of their trip together down the Mississippi, “talking, singing and laughing.” Huck says, “But somehow I couldn’t seem to strike no places to harden me against him, but only the other kind.” He thinks about how sweet and good Jim is with him, and what a good friend he is. Then Huck looks around and sees the letter that he’s written to Miss Watson:

I took it up, and held it in my hand. I was trembling, because I’d got to decide, forever betwixt two things and I knowed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself, “All right then, I’ll go to hell”—and tore it up.

Though his society and its churches, which have set God up as a supporter of slavery, tell him he’s wrong to help Jim escape and that he will go to hell for it, Huck’s love and his conscience compel him to help Jim anyway. In the end, by acting in accordance with his love and his conscience, Huck does the truly Christian thing. The true Christian does not follow church dogma out of fear of hell; it is the person who, in defiance of everything, up to and including the threat of hellfire, does the right thing out of love.

In our materialistic culture we are tempted to believe in a God for whom the afterlife is a matter of cold-blooded deal making as the religious legalists would suggest: "Believe in me and I'll give you heaven, refuse and you go to hell." Given how much pain and suffering there is in the world, one can hardly fault some people for believing in a wrathful, legalistic God. But can you worship such a God? Can you hold up rules and regulations, punishment and rewards as the best hope for humanity? Rather than do so, I would suggest that in the face of a barter system with the Almighty that we shake our heads firmly, affirming our allegiance to the liberal faith, and say with Huckleberry Finn, "Alright then, I'll go to hell."

Such commitment to love, ultimately, is the kingdom of heaven. Such is the hope of humankind. May we have courage to speak the truth with love and a love greater than any law which can be written, a love written large in the action and movement of our lives. Amen and amen.

The pastoral prayer is one probably well-known to you. It is one written by St. Francis of Assisi. He was the least legalistic of Christians. In an age of intolerance and crusades, Francis exemplified a new spirit. He traveled to the Middle East and prayed in a mosque with Moslems. His first words to his followers upon leaving the mosque were, "God is everywhere!"

Make us instruments of peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand, to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Amen