

The Key To Living

by John Whittle

Jesus laid claim to an immense ability when He said, “*I am come that you might have life and that you might have it more abundantly*” (John 10:10). He did not think of it in terms of a new religion, but as the *key* to living. He did not come to give the world merely a new *teaching*, but a new Spirit. He came to give the world *life*, and that *life* was Himself.

We have been inclined to make a new *religion* out of what was meant to be a way of life—life as it was originally designed by God. Jesus set out, by the gift of Himself, to bring people into a right relationship with God and each other.

Life is relationship; not just an animated existence, but persons relating. Life is not something in a test tube, not an *it* or a *thing*. A babe receives his personhood through persons. He becomes a fully developed person by being in a variety of relationships with a variety of persons. What would he become if he were isolated from everyone else? We receive the awareness of our personhood from or through each other, and we are very much the result of inter-relating.

This is life—the finding of ourselves through each other. Even so, it is obvious that because each of us is an original creation there are amazing differences in our personalities. Where right relations are achieved, the differences are thrilling and creative, but we are less than real persons where this is not achieved. This is exactly what Jesus meant when He said He had come to give *life*. Life without relationship is a distorted and destructive experience—a mere waiting for death.

He in whom we all meet is *Love*. Love is the essence of true relationships, and therefore, real relationships have the *nature* of Love. Because, “*You shall love the Lord your God . . . and your neighbor as yourself,*” we have a three-fold relationship: love to God, love to yourself, and love to your neighbor. Love is the correcting of distorted relationships. But how do we understand this beleaguered word “love”? In simple terms, love is self-giving—in contradistinction to the self-centeredness of our distorted world. So, as soon as our relationships are in love, they are true relationships, and we only begin to *live* at that point.

All I am saying is, that man’s supreme problem is how to relate—how to love. Our outer world we have conquered, but our inner world defeats us as long as we cannot love. We ask, “How on earth can we relate rightly?” How can our inner world match the splendor of achievements that are taking place in the outer world of man, and how can we make these achievements creative instead of destructive?

God’s total acceptance of the unacceptable is the beginning of the answer. Paul says this is the qualitative difference between the love of God and the best that humans can do. He loved us “*while we were yet sinners,*” declaring it so on the basis of the death of Christ—total self-giving. If I can believe that at the heart of the universe there is this self-giving love for me, then I have the start of a real and creative relationship by which I pass from death—because of distorted relationships—to life, by a true relationship of love.

But I personally have found it very difficult to accept and love myself. Jude says, “*Keep yourselves in the love of God.*” I did not find this easy, partly because I had not been taught to do this. I could not really accept God’s acceptance of me, even though I gave lip service to the idea. We cannot truly “accept Christ” and at the same time continue to reject ourselves, whom He has accepted. We will never have a practical, experiential rest in God’s love that way. We must accept what He has accepted, and love what He has loved. Then we are conditioned for right relationships with others.

I had to come to realize that I could not possibly accept and love other people with God's love unless I accepted and loved myself and saw myself in the right relationship that God had created. We are to love our neighbors as ourselves, but we will not do this until we see that we are truly loving at our center and start living at peace with ourselves. Union with God means union with myself also, and it is only out of this that union with others comes. It is a wonderful, threefold uniting, in love, of that which has been so desperately separated and distorted.

If I do not love myself, my love for others is a phony thing and will continually break down. This is both disappointing and disillusioning. I found that a critical or censorious spirit towards others always seemed to stem from my having that attitude toward myself. If I love and accept myself, I am able to do the same with others who, like me, are full of imperfections, but are totally accepted by God. Hence the circle of acceptance is complete.

At a conference, a friend of mine, seeing someone who had been a blessing to him in the various sessions, said, "I do thank God for you." This man's reply was a little surprising, "Do you know, I thank God for myself." But this is wholly right when we know in what sense we may fully accept and love ourselves.

Looking at the story of the Prodigal Son, we see that whatever the son's estimate of his sin and his affront to the father, it would have been a further affront to fail to accept his father's acceptance of him. To have differed with his father regarding the place he should now take in the household would certainly not have been humility, except of a spurious kind. The speech composed by the boy in the far country was not appropriate once he was in the embrace of the father. Of course, there was need for change in direction in him, just as there sometimes is in us, but change is only possible through love, not as part of a self-improvement program.

Often the proof that we are trying to "make ourselves over" is that we try it on others. When I married, I had something I called "spirituality," and I felt that my wife was a little lacking in it on some points. I was tempted, on occasion, to try to make her over. I soon found my mistake where she was concerned! A false spirituality is very obnoxious! I learned again that whatever change is desirable only comes about, in myself or anyone else, by loving or being loved fully and freely. This, then, is the operation of God upon humanity. We are changed by accepting His acceptance of us, which provides an atmosphere in which change becomes possible.

Life, therefore, is relating in love—to God, to self, and to our neighbor. The miracle of change stems from the supreme revelation of the source of love, which is God in Christ. He who unites the fragmentized universe has revealed the uniting power—love—which is not merely to operate *for* man, but to take *possession* of him. The meaning of being made "*in the image of God*" is that love is the essence of my existence. Since God is love, my real identity is love—my real self is selflessness.

"*God is love*" is the most revolutionary concept of all time. Men may attempt to root themselves by all sorts of philosophic and scientific ideas, but the Christian finds that he can only be rooted in love. This requires a leap of faith, because of the distortions in man and in the appearance of things, and this leap of faith is the characteristic of the Christian.

The scientist sees man rooted in an ordered universe, yet this knowledge alone does not keep him from feeling sterile and unsatisfied at heart. God is manifested in and operates through law and order. Love is the creative power which works according to that law and order. But law and order are only means of manifestation, not the life itself. Only love is that. Therefore, though the scientist gets us on our way in an ordered universe and the religionist roots us in innumerable laws, the Christian roots us in a Person: "*In Him we live*

and move and have our being,” In the realization that he is rooted in love, regenerate man has come home; he has returned to his origin.

At the center of our small personal worlds, love confronts us with the challenge to enter into relationship with God, who is the center of all things. Very satisfying is the thought expressed by the couplet:

*My heart is at the Secret Source
of every living thing.*

When we respond, we begin to be *divine love in manifestation*. Now we have to learn the nature of this relationship and how the appearance of separation between ourselves and God is false and *has been* overcome. It is of the utmost importance to see that the painful paths of self-perfecting that many travel after this initial response result from an almost total misunderstanding of the relationship. When we responded, the relationship was based purely upon us receiving what we were not, and could not be. It was not *begun* by us doing something—either to prepare ourselves for it, or to promote it.

As soon as we try to do something to continue the relationship, we enter into conflict. The divine order of the creation dictates that we are simply receivers. God creates so that He might have that which He can fill with Himself. The Scripture says, *“He fills all things.”* If man thinks he can contribute to this, he is in for conflict and unrest, because he is distorting the relationship. We have to learn to receive: *“Come unto me, and I will give you rest”* means that in coming, our efforts cease and rest follows. It becomes a moment-by-moment relationship, and a constant way of life.