

# Tough Questions/Real Answers:

## WHICH WAY? THIS WAY!

### John 14:1-6

#### *Is Jesus the only way to salvation?*

A sermon preached by  
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Grandfathers can be great teachers of the faith. There was a little boy named Kevin who was four years old. One Saturday morning, he went out with his grandpa to get some breakfast. They climbed into grandpa's pickup truck, and down the road they went. On the way, grandpa turned to Kevin and asked, "Which way is heaven?" Kevin pointed to the roof of the truck. Then grandpa said, "Which way is hell?" Kevin pointed to the floorboard. Grandpa continued, "And where are you going?"

Kevin replied with a big smile, "Dunkin' Donuts!"<sup>1</sup>

Well, that was the truth. The four-year-old's mind was more on breakfast than eternity.

What is the truth about eternity? Is there any absolute truth about spiritual things? Or is everything relative to your culture and history? Does it matter what you believe, or do you just have to be sincere about it? Can we honestly say that Jesus is the only way of salvation, when there are so many other religions in the world? Isn't that the height of arrogance?

This is your tough question for today, and it's a question that has generated lots of writing and discussion across the centuries of Christian thought—more than I can share with you in our brief time this morning. Is knowing Jesus the only way to experience salvation and come into a relationship with God?

Christianity does make some claims about being a unique way of salvation. We are not the only religion that does that, but we do believe that. Jesus is the one, the true, the unique way to be in relationship with our God. We base that belief on the truth claims of Scripture. In John 14:6, Jesus says, "*I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*" In Acts 4:12, Peter and John give a defense of their faith before the Jewish Council, and Peter says, "*There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.*"

When it comes down to it, what makes Christianity unique is very simple—it's Christ. Human beings are essentially religious beings; we are wired for God. There are thousands of religions, cults, philosophies to which humans have given allegiance since the beginning

of time. What makes Christianity unique is not the sacred Scriptures—lots of religions have sacred scriptures. It's not our Christian morality, either—many religions and philosophies have standards of conduct and ethics. There is only one thing that is unique about Christianity, and that is Jesus Christ.

So what is so unique about Jesus? He is unique in his **qualifications**. He is not just a great human teacher; he is, as Peter put it, "*the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.*"<sup>2</sup> No major world religion today makes that claim about its founder. Muslims are careful not to call Muhammad a deity. Buddha and Confucius were great teachers, but nothing more. Yet Christians believe that Jesus was fully divine as he was fully human. That is unique.

Jesus is also unique in his **achievement**. He did not just teach a better way or how to ascend to a higher level of consciousness. He did not just talk about salvation; he accomplished it. We make the claim that on the cross, Jesus took the sin of the world upon himself and reconciled God and human beings forever. He was more than a teacher; he was (and is) the Savior of the world.

Jesus did this through a totally unique experience called the **resurrection**. Other religions record instances of the dead coming back to life, but then those persons all die again. Jesus raised a few people from the dead, but they all eventually died a second time. Jesus only died once; then he rose again; now he lives forever. He is the continual abiding presence, through the Holy Spirit, of God in the world. Buddha entered into *nirvana*. Muhammad died and was buried; you can visit his grave. But Jesus is alive today, and we can know him personally, spiritually, relationally.<sup>3</sup>

The truth claims we make about Jesus—his qualifications, his achievement, his resurrection—are pretty bold stuff. They are unique in the history of world religions.

The Christian idea of salvation is also unique. Religions, as a rule, are systems of thought that give an ethical and spiritual foundation to life. Religions are sets of principles, beliefs, rules to follow in order to please God and achieve ultimate meaning. What's so different about Christianity?

In a word, it's grace. In his book *What's So Amazing About Grace?*, Philip Yancey tells about a conversation during a conference on world religions in England a number of years ago. Under discussion was what, if anything, was unique to Christianity. Almost every element had been considered and dismissed until C. S. Lewis, the British theologian and writer, walked into the room. When he asked what was going on, they asked him what he thought Christianity's unique contribution to world religion was. "Oh, that's easy," Lewis replied. "It's grace." After some discussion, the other scholars agreed.

Grace is the unmerited favor of God. It is based in God's unconditional love. We don't have to earn our salvation; it's a gift. Philip Yancey says, "The notion of God's love coming to us free of charge, no strings attached, seems to go against every instinct of humanity. The Buddhist eight-fold path, the Hindu doctrine of Karma, the Jewish covenant, the Muslim code of law—each of these offers a way to earn approval. Only Christianity dares to make God's love unconditional."<sup>4</sup>

We believe, like many other religions, that human beings are sinful, that we fall short of God's glory. But in grace God comes to us and loves us and draws us toward God. We respond in faith, by believing and trusting, not by doing things to earn God's approval. In God's love and mercy, we find forgiveness for our sins and healing for our brokenness. This is God's gift to us through Jesus Christ.

It's the difference between two little words: DO and DONE. Most religions focus on what you have to *do* to get in good with God or gods—follow the rules, make the sacrifices, whatever. Christianity focuses on what God has *done* for us in Jesus Christ. Salvation was accomplished 2,000 years ago; all we have to *do* is to let it be *done* for us.

So the answer to the question today is not a set of religious principles or moral rules. The answer is a person—Jesus Christ—and in a relationship with him. Our ethics, our code of behavior, grows out of that relationship, not the other way around. The answer is, “Yes, Jesus Christ is unique among all the leaders and/or founders of world religions. He is the one way we know for sure that we can be in a relationship with God and be saved.” This is what we believe.

So we're halfway there. Having answered that question, we have to answer an equally important one. How, then, are we to treat those who believe, sometimes with great sincerity, in other religions? What are we to believe about the faithful Jew, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, or any other brand of religion? We live in a global village today; it's a pluralistic world. How can we faithfully assert the particularity of our faith—that is, that we believe in Jesus as the only way to the Father—without becoming exclusivistic, arrogant, and even hateful toward other believers? In humility, we have to admit we are no better and no more children of God than any other human being. But we do believe differently than many of them. How can we still extend the hand of Christian love to someone who is not a Christian?

One way is to acknowledge that there is some truth in all religions. The Bible says that there are some universal truths that are evident to all humankind. Creation itself speaks of the majesty and power and creativity of God. Paul writes in Romans: “*For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse.*”<sup>5</sup>

Inside human beings, there is a sense of right and wrong, an internal conscience that has been placed there by God. Over the course of human history, different religions and philosophies have come to remarkably similar conclusions about ethical behavior. There are statements of the Golden Rule—“*Do to others as you would have them do to you*”<sup>6</sup>—in several religious traditions. Nearly every religion has a code of conduct, because God has planted a conscience in our souls, and we know instinctively what is right and wrong.

This is not to say that all religions are equally valid or that we do not have any particular claims on the truth. But it is to say that there is common ground between people of all faiths, and that provides a basis for friendship and dialogue. C. S. Lewis wrote in his classic book *Mere Christianity*: “If you are a Christian, you do not have to believe that all other religions are simply wrong all through. If you are an atheist, you do have to believe that the main point in all the religions in the whole world is simply one huge mistake. If you are a Christian, you are free to think that all these religions, even the [odd]est ones, contain at least some hint of the truth. When I was an atheist, I had to try to persuade myself that most of the human race have always been wrong about the question that mattered to them most; when I became a Christian, I was able to take a more liberal view. But, of course, being a Christian does mean thinking that where Christianity differs from other religions, Christianity is right and they are wrong. As in arithmetic—there is only one right answer to a sum, and all other answers are wrong; but some of the wrong answers are much nearer being right than others.”<sup>7</sup>

The very existence of so many different religions is testimony to the reality of God. Worldwide, only 4.5% of people are atheists.<sup>8</sup> There are many religions in the world. All of them contain some truth. All of them point to the God we know through Jesus Christ. We proclaim that Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. He is the unique and best witness to what God is up to in the world. This is not to say that we can't be friends with those who believe differently. In fact, all the more reason to be friends, so that through our friendship, they (and we) might come to a better understanding of the truth. Just because someone gets the answer wrong, you don't expel them from school; you continue the process of learning.

But can they be saved? Can sincere believers in other religions enter into eternal life? I don't know. In Romans, chapters 9-11, Paul lays out an argument for the salvation of the Jews, even though they have rejected Christ as Savior. In John 10:16, Jesus makes a curious statement: *"I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd."* What did he mean by that?

In his sermon to the Roman centurion Cornelius, Peter says, *"I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every people anyone who fears him and practices righteousness is acceptable to him."*<sup>9</sup> That's drawing a pretty big circle of inclusion.

As I have told you before, whether or not a person enters into heaven is a management decision; I work in sales and customer service. I know God is loving and merciful and just and holy, and I can trust God to make the right decision, whatever that is. New Testament scholar Gerald Sloyan, commenting on John 14:6, put it this way: "Jesus must be proclaimed as the one way to God to whomever is willing to listen, while leaving the faith and the fate of those who have never heard the gospel to a God who is equal to the problem."<sup>10</sup> Or as Belton Joyner, a United Methodist pastor, writes, "The balance is between being neighbor and being witness. The [main] ingredient of the relationship is always love."<sup>11</sup>

So our mission in the world today has to be evangelistic. Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. It is crucially important to share this Good News with a lost and broken world. We have experienced the abundant life that a relationship with Jesus gives—the assurance of forgiveness, the joy of the Spirit, the hope of heaven. We've got to tell it! Yet we tell it with respect and humility to those outside the faith. We want to share it in a loving and positive way, not tearing down others' beliefs but lifting up Christ. Nevertheless, we have to be courageous enough to share.

Tony P. Hall is a former Congressman from the state of Ohio. After reaching the apex of his career, he experienced the emptiness of ambition and politics. A prayer breakfast started a journey that led both him and his wife to become Christians. From that point on, his faith became something he loved to share.

Once on a Congressional trip to an Islamic country, the ambassador greeted him at the airport and warned him right away, "Congressman Hall, I just want to remind you that you're in a Muslim country. Don't talk about religion, or it could really set back what we're trying to accomplish here."

Hall nodded politely. When they arrived at the office of the head of state, the Muslim leader asked Hall why he had come to his country. Hall said, "I would like to be your friend. I would like our countries to be friends. And I would like to invite you to the National Prayer Breakfast, in the name of Jesus."

The ambassador almost fell out of his chair, but the Muslim leader got very excited. He slapped his knee and said, “That is remarkable. You have come all this way to be my friend and to talk to me about Jesus. That is wonderful! My mother used to talk to me a lot about Jesus when I was a child. We should talk about Jesus more often.”

Then the Muslim leader turned to the ambassador and said, “Why don't you talk about Jesus?”<sup>12</sup>

Why don't we talk about Jesus more? He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father, except through him. He is the answer you can bet your eternity on. He is the unique message God has given us to share with the world. Go tell somebody!

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<sup>1</sup> Kathy Chapman, “Heart to Heart,” Today’s Christian Woman, on PreachingToday.com.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 16:16.

<sup>3</sup> Nicky Gumbel, *Searching Issues* (Colorado Springs: Cook, 1994), pp. 29f.

<sup>4</sup> Philip Yancey, *What’s so Amazing about Grace?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> Romans 1:19-20.

<sup>6</sup> Luke 6:31.

<sup>7</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, (New York: Macmillan, 1979), p. 43.

<sup>8</sup> Gumbel, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

<sup>9</sup> Acts 10:34f.

<sup>10</sup> Gerald Sloyan, *John* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), p. 179.

<sup>11</sup> F. Belton Joyner, Jr., *Being Methodist in the Bible Belt* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 76.

<sup>12</sup> Joel Rosenberg, “Breakfast with the President,” *National Review Online*, February 4, 2005.