

Being Christian In A Multi-Faith World

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Tonight we are finishing our series “World Religions: Being Christian in a Multi-Faith World.” We have looked at 4 of the world’s biggest religions: Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. I hope each week you have learned about the religions, and at the same time, been challenged to live deeper into your own faith and teachings of Christ.

Next week we will have our Ash Wednesday service. Same time. Same place. Then the following week we will kick off a new series called “Leaving Egypt.” We will journey through the Israelite’s escape from Egypt. I think we will find it speaks very deeply to our lives today.

Now, tonight we are finishing up our series on World Religions by looking at Christianity.

Our Scripture for tonight is an important understanding of what Christianity is and what it is not. It comes from Matthew 10:34-39. This is Jesus speaking to his disciples. As you listen to this text I want you to ask yourself if this text depicts what Christianity means to you.

Matthew 10:34-39

“Don’t think that I’ve come to bring peace to the earth. I haven’t come to bring peace but a sword. ³⁵ I’ve come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. ³⁶ People’s enemies are members of their own households.

³⁷ “Those who love father or mother more than me aren’t worthy of me. Those who love son or daughter more than me aren’t worthy of me. ³⁸ Those who don’t pick up their crosses and follow me aren’t worthy of me. ³⁹ Those who find their lives will lose them, and those who lose their lives because of me will find them.

Does that text describe what Christianity means to you? Probably not.

Most Christians I talk with say Christianity is about love. Most Christians would say that the heart of Christianity is John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only son.” As Christians we know the greatest command that we are called to do is love. Love God and love everyone.

An Often Untold Christian History

Love is exactly what Christianity is about. When Christianity first started it was deeply rooted in loving and caring in the world. This is not how others viewed Christians though. People thought they held secret orgies and believed that they ate babies. The belief about eating babies came about because deformed babies would be left on the streets to die and the early Christians would take them and care for them. People knew that, but they also heard Christians talk about eating Christ’s body and blood and they knew Christians believe that God came in the form of a baby.

It was obvious to them that the Christians were taking the babies and eating them in some kind of strange worship. You see what happens when we assume things about religions?

Early Christianity suffered a lot of persecution for the first few centuries. They were killed for entertainment because they were different and they were upsetting social order.

In 312 C.E. everything changed. The Roman Emperor, Constantine, had a vision and saw a cross in the sky with words on it that said, "Conquer by this." Constantine was convinced that the Christian God was speaking to him. Through Constantine Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. This ended persecution for Christians.

After seeing this vision, Constantine created a replica of what he saw. There is a small picture in your bulletin that attempts a simple drawing of what it might have looked like from the descriptions given. He created a cross in which the upright beam was covered in gold. On top of the whole thing was a wreath of gold and precious stones with the letters for the name of Christ. Then there was a banner with the emperor and his family on it. It is a significant point to mention that Constantine used a spear for the upright beam of the cross.

It was this cross, that was actually a spear, that Constantine had this carried at the front of his army. A cross that could literally kill people. The cross that Christ dies on, the cross that Romans used to make people afraid, and that Christians took as a symbol of how to live life...is now used to create fear and terror again...but now not just in the name of Rome, but in the name of Jesus Christ himself.

What started as a religion of love and caring for others quickly became a religion of domination and hostility toward anyone who believed differently.

By 395 C.E. it was Roman law that all other religions and places of worship would be destroyed and anyone opposing the law would be put to death. People were conquered and forced to become Christian.

Popes and Christian leaders would go on to play important roles in persecuting people who believed differently. This kind of thinking would lead the church into the Crusades and what Christians termed as "Holy Wars" to destroy Islam and take over sites that Muslims controlled.

We also shouldn't forget that from 500 – 1800 C.E. Christians continuously persecuted and killed Jewish people. They viewed it as their duty and obligation to forcibly convert Jewish people or persecute them if they would not convert. They were the ultimate enemy.

When colonists came to N. America they believed God gave them this land because they were Christians and they had every right to take the land from the Native Americans. When smallpox struck the Native American tribes the colonists believed God was killing them. They believed they were superior to the Native Americans and they enslaved them, killed them, and raped them.

Over time, we Christians have become good and faithful followers of a Roman Imperial version of Jesus Christ. One that focuses on superiority, conquest, domination, and hostility toward anyone who is different and not Christian.

What Constantine started has had deep effects throughout the history of Christianity.

Retreat Story

I went to a Franciscan Retreat Center last year and I met a group of Franciscans who all became Franciscan monks together at the same time. They were celebrating 60 years since they first started together. They are all over the country and they came to celebrate. I was talking with one of them and he said, “Joel, I hate flying on airplanes. People always want to know what your job is. I try to get out of it by telling them I’m teacher. Then they say, ‘What do you teach.’ I teach religion. Then they say, ‘Where do you teach?’ There is just no getting away from it. I hate it.”

He loves being a pastor and leading a church. But he hates telling people because the moment they know he is a Christian, they either love him or hate him. They become scared of him and worry he is judging them and condemning them or they feel instantly connected. You’ve probably had that experience at some point, or maybe there has been a time when you did not want to say you are a Christian because it has so many negative perceptions.

We must be totally honest. Christianity, like every religion, is in some way a failed religion. We have failed to follow Christ in many ways and being a Christian is misunderstood.

That doesn’t mean we do away with it. That doesn’t mean it’s all wrong and bad. It means we need to return to the very heart of it. It means we need to go back to what is “fundamental.” We need to “conserve” what is good and true. And we need to “liberate” what has been forgotten and lost.

To long Christianity has been hostile. Too long we have forgotten and warped the teaching of Jesus to be exclusive and hostile because this is how we have been taught to think.

Our text tonight is one that has been misused to promote that hostility in Christianity.

Tribes/Identities

People have taken the text we read to mean you must turn away from your family if they aren’t followers of Jesus. Jesus is dividing believers from none believers. That not what it’s about at all.

At the time of Jesus, the family was the primary social, religious, political unit. It was its own tribe. It is how you learned to distinguish between good/bad, right/wrong, us/them. (It’s very much the same today.) The sword Jesus talks about is a sword that cuts right through that tribe.

Jesus is saying, “I didn’t come to bring peace and make everyone the same. I came bringing the sword. Dividing people and moving them out of their tribal identities that are focused on “us”

versus “them.” “People’s enemies are of their own households” because it is there you learn about the world. It is there you learn to create “us” versus “them” categories.

It is there you learn to judge what is good or bad, right or wrong.

It is there the “other” is formed.

It is there we create division rather than unity.

Growing up in a tribe and creating an identity isn’t a bad thing. It is necessary. But eventually there comes a time when that needs to all fall away. There comes a time when the division and separation from everyone else needs to end. “Us” and “Them” must become “We.”

This text which sounds so violent and hostile is actually all about unity and coming together. It is the breaking down of boundaries and identities so that people can truly love and be connected. This was what Christianity was all about in the very beginning. It was rich and poor, men and women, slave come free dropping their identities so that they could be united.

The Apostle Paul says it this way: “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:27-28).

What Jesus and Paul are teaching is that Christians give up their identities. It’s not that when we become Christian we put our Christian identity on top of all our other identities and make it the most important. Their teaching is that when we become Christian, all of our identities disappear.

From the start, being Christian was not about taking on a new identity that separated you from everyone else. It was about letting go of our identities because of how they separate us from everyone else.

Being Christian meant having no identity. The first Christians weren’t even called Christians. They were called followers of The Way. The Way of giving up your identity, giving up your life, recognizing everyone as equal.

Don’t get me wrong, our identities can be helpful and serve the purpose of actually identifying things. I love to know that someone is a parent or grandparent, sister or brother, etc. Having identities is great, but never should your identity create division against anyone else. Then it becomes a problem and goes against the teachings of Jesus and Paul. Race divisions, the gender divisions, the national divisions...the religious divisions. These are all ways of claiming identity that can be harmful. It’s created an “Us” vs “Them.”

Christian and Non-Christian

A little while ago a professor from Wheaton College, a Christian college, decided to wear a hijab to show support of Muslims. At one point she quoted the Pope saying that Christians and Muslims worship the same God. The school put her on Administrative Leave because they didn’t believe that was true. That is there perspective, though I should also say that many Christians,

Jews, and Muslims say we all worship the same God. The Pope says it as well. We learned last week that Jews, Christians and Muslims all connect back to Abraham and we all claim that we are worshiping the God of Abraham...but not everyone has the same opinion. That is fine. Yet, for some reason a prominent pastor decided to share the article on social media, condemning the belief that Muslims and many Christians hold that Muslims worship the same God...all while highlighting differences of the religions and trying to make Christianity sound better than Islam.

In a way, he was using Christianity to be hostile to another religion. He was clinging to his Christian identity more than following Christ. You see, too many Christians view being Christian as an identity. It is something that separates us. Something that makes us special and unique and different...but this is exactly what Jesus and Paul speak against. When we become Christian we are to no longer hold onto our identities...that includes our Christian identity.

What talking about Paul's claim that there is neither Jew nor Greek, the philosopher and scholar Peter Rollins says that, "*We can even say that in Christ there is neither Christian nor non-Christian – for the word "Christian" itself now refers to the embrace of a concrete identity...rather than the renunciation of [identity]*" (Peter Rollins. *Insurrection*. New York: Howard Books, 2011. p. 168).

We have created a way to separate ourselves from everyone. We have turned Christianity into an identity, rather than a way of living and following Christ. It has become something to defend and a way to separate ourselves from everyone else.

I am not suggesting we do away with the phrase "Christian." However, I am suggesting we take seriously how we identify with Christ. It should not be in a way that sets apart or excludes. It should be in a way that brings unity and reconciliation.

Christ calls us into a ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5). That is different than inclusion. Inclusion means we welcome people into being a part of us and what we are doing. Reconciliation means we are united with people who are different and we accept them as different. That is an important distinction.

Promoting Unity

Christ didn't come thinking everyone would believe in him. In the Gospel of John, Jesus says to the disciples following him, "some of you don't believe. Nobody can come to me unless the Father enables them to do so." After this many of his disciples turned away and no longer followed him. Jesus turns to the 12 disciples and says "Do you also want to leave?" Peter says "Lord, where would we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are God's son." (Jn. 6:64-69). Jesus didn't condemn the people who left. He didn't say all other religions are wrong, follow me. Jesus said, "You can only believe if God allows you to believe." And Peter says, "Lord, where would we go. You have the words of life for us."

That is exactly how I feel. I have spent tons of time studying each of these religions. I find them all to be beautiful in their own ways. But I feel just like Peter. Where else would I go? Christ has the words of life that speak to me...

Now, what if the followers of all the other faiths feel the same way about their religion? What if they feel that way about Buddha, or Muhammad, or Moses? What if their teachings and words give them life in ways no other religion can? Do we set ourselves up to oppose them and go against them because they do not speak to us in that way?

How do you think Jesus, Buddha, Muhammad, and Moses would treat each other? What would it be like if they walked into a bar together? Do you think they would compete for who has the best religion? Do you think they would bash each other's teachings? Do you think they would try to convert each other? Or do you think they would talk and learn from each other? Do you think they would respect each other and be reconciled together?

Conclusion

In the next 30 years, in most of our lifetimes, all of the world religions we have studied will grow. Islam will either be about equal or larger than Christianity. What will you do? Will you be upset, hostile, and condemning? Will you try to convert people to take on the identity of Christian? Will you try to persuade others that Christianity is the best religion and every other religion is fake and bad? Will you hold on to your Christian "identity," which endlessly pursues creating separation and hostility?

Or will you let go and follow The Way of Christ? Will you love and focus on unity and reconciliation? Will you focus on helping bring the best out of each other? Some will undoubtedly find Christ has words of life for them, but many more will certainly find that followers of Christ have a genuine love for them, and desire to be reconciled with them.

That is what will change the world.

E. Stanley Jones (who Matt mentioned when he taught about Buddhism) was a Methodist missionary to India. He got to know Gandhi really well and learned a lot from him. He ended up writing a biography about Gandhi, who was a Hindu. Martin Luther King Jr., who was a Christian, read that biography and it inspired him to start the non-violent civil rights movement. MLK was good friends with the well-known Jewish leader and scholar Abraham Heschel (who we talked about when we learned about Judaism). Abraham Heschel and MLK walked arm in arm in the march from Selma to Birmingham, AL for civil rights.

A Hindu, Christian, and Jew united with a similar vision. Influenced by each other. Connected by each other. Religions reconciled together, not competing, but working and helping bring the best out of each other. Allowing God to speak in and through each other.

I'm not sure that the kingdom of heaven comes any other way.