

Christianity and Islam
Genesis 16:1-4, 15

As a boy I remember reading stories set in exotic locales where Muslims live. In most of the stories, at some point, the hero, who is a Westerner and a Christian, is chased by a mob of Muslims shouting, “Death to the infidel.” I would think to myself, “I am sure glad those Muslims are on the other side of the world.” And I never gave Muslims much more thought than that.

The world has changed a lot since I was a boy. The sheer number of Muslims is growing rapidly. It is possible that Muslims will outnumber Christians during our lifetime. And Muslims are now very much a part of the Western world. There are about six million Muslims in the United States. There is probably not a person here this morning who doesn't work with a Muslim or have a Muslim neighbor. My daughter-in-law is Muslim.

And, of course, because of oil and military concerns we Westerners have a large presence in the Muslim world is a gross understatement.

The barriers between the Christian world and the Muslim world have broken down. We are in the process of becoming one world.

This morning I want to talk about Christianity and Islam—what our religions have in common and how we are different. Next week I will talk about Christians and Muslims—how we are to relate to Muslims and remain true to Christ.

Christianity and Islam, what do we have in common? We do have some very important things in common. Primarily, we, along with the Jews, all worship the God of Abraham. Muhammad taught that the Arabs were descendants of Abraham through Ishmael, Abraham's eldest son. The Jews are the descendants of Abraham through Isaac, Abraham's son by Sarah. All Muslims consider themselves spiritual descendants of Abraham, just as Christians consider themselves spiritual descendants of Abraham. We all agree that the God of Abraham is the one true God. We believe the one true God is the creator and ruler of heaven and earth. We believe that our creator God is holy and righteous and wants us to be holy and righteous.

We take those ideas for granted. Belief in one personal God puts us in disagreement with the other religions of the world. The Hindus do not believe in one God. They believe in many gods. In fact, in the very ancient days all people believe in many gods who were constantly fighting and bickering among themselves and used people as pawns in their conflicts. On the other hand, the Buddhists believe in one God. But that God is an impersonal force, not a person. Their God is both good and evil, and because the Buddhist God is not a person, it does not have the ability to know or care whether we even exist, to say nothing about caring whether we are righteous or not.

When we compare the God of the Christians, the Jews and the Muslims to the god or gods of the Hindus and the Buddhists, we realize that we have much more in common with one another than we do with them.

So, Christians, Muslims and Jews all have this in common: We believe that in one God, who is the creator and only ruler of heaven and earth. We believe our God is holy and righteous and calls us to be holy and righteous.

So what is different about our religious beliefs?

If you asked a Muslim how Christianity and Islam are different, they would say, "You Christians don't believe in one God. You believe in three gods. You say the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are each gods."

Of course, that is a misunderstanding. We believe in one God. We believe the one God is a Trinity, three persons eternally united in love and purpose.

For many people that seems to be a complex and difficult idea. The Muslims believe it is a step backward toward the worship of many gods. They believe Christianity is a corruption of the true religion.

They believe God is one supreme person, who created and rules alone. The Muslim God, Allah, dwells beyond the heavens, beyond what human beings can know and understand. Allah is all powerful and all knowing. Allah rules without any rivals. Allah is holy and righteous and demands that we be holy and righteous. Allah sits in judgment over humanity. Those who obey are rewarded. Those who disobey are punished.

Muhammad taught that since human beings cannot know God, every now and then God selects a person and sends an angel to teach him the ways of God. These persons are called prophets, and they are to teach the rest of humanity the will of God. Adam was the first prophet. Abraham and Moses were prophets. Jesus was a prophet. Muhammad was the last of the prophets. The prophets didn't teach people new things. The first prophet, Adam, taught humanity everything we needed to know about God and about how to live in obedience to God's will. But people keep corrupting the one true religion and falling into confusion. The prophets are sent to remind the people of the right way and call them back to obedience. The Muslims believe that since the teachings of Muhammad are written in the Koran, there is no need for another prophet. Muhammad was the last of the prophets. The true understanding of God and holy living is recorded in the book. If people will simply keep reading the Koran, they will never again forget the true religion. If you want to win God's favor and God's rewards, read the Koran and do what it says. It's as simple as that.

The Muslims believe the main difference between Christians and Muslims is that Christians have corrupted the one true religion by teaching the doctrine of the Trinity and elevating Jesus, whom they call a prophet and the Spirit, whom they would call an angel, to the level of God.

I think most Christians would say the main difference between Christianity and Islam is that Christians believe God is first and foremost gracious and loving. The Muslims believe that God is first and foremost holy and righteous. Muhammad rejected the Christian teaching that God forgives our sins for Christ's sake. He believed that the idea that God would forgive our sins was a corruption of Christ's teachings introduced by Paul. Muhammad and the Muslims believe that Paul was a false teacher.

Muhammad believed that God is first and foremost holy and righteous. God may at times be gracious and loving. But God's foremost concern at all times is to enforce the divine laws of righteousness. Muslims believe that for God to forgive our sins is to undermine God's eternal laws.

The picture that Muslims have of God is a great, high king sitting on the throne in the heavens, issuing decrees and seeing to it that those decrees are strictly enforced. The picture of God as a loving parent is foreign to them.

The idea of God coming to earth and taking on human flesh in order to save us is repugnant to them. They believe that would be beneath God's dignity. And to teach that God submitted to human beings, to be humiliated, tortured and crucified by them, is blasphemous in their eyes. They would have nothing but contempt for such a god.

The Muslims do not believe that God would even allow one of the prophets to suffer such a humiliation. That's why they don't believe Christ actually died on the Cross. They don't believe Christ is the Son of God or divine in any way. However they do believe that Christ was one of the great prophets. And because he was a prophet of God and God wouldn't allow one of his prophets to be humiliated, they believe God took him to heaven and saved him from the Cross.

So, to talk about Christ dying for our sins makes no sense at any level for the Muslims. In the first place, he didn't die on the cross. If he had, it would just have proved he was not truly a prophet of God. And besides that, this whole idea of God suffering and dying for our sins is ridiculous to the Muslims.

Because the Muslims don't believe in God's grace, they live with the constant fear of being rejected and condemned by God. It is up to them to earn their salvation. Other than sending the prophets to remind people of God's righteous laws, God does nothing to help people achieve righteousness and salvation.

Now, for most Muslims that's fine. They don't think it is all that difficult to live a righteous life. The five pillars of the faith or basic requirements for righteous living are these: First, never question the creed, "There is no god but Allah, Muhammad is the messenger of Allah." Second, join in the prescribed prayers each day praying toward Mecca. Third, give to the mosque and to the poor. Fourth, observe the fasts on the holy days. Fifth, go on a pilgrimage to Mecca once during your lifetime. If you do those things and do more good deeds than bad during your lifetime, you will be rewarded by God.

The more serious Muslims are aware of the standard of righteousness that Jesus lifted up in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus taught us that in order to win salvation we must be perfect. That means we must love all our neighbors, even our enemies. We should gladly give them the shirt off our back and go a second mile for them. We are to forgive those who sin against us. We are to dedicate our lives in service to others, not to seeking wealth or power or prestige. We are to be free from lust and anger and anxiety.

Jesus' standard of righteousness is beyond what any of us can achieve on our own. That is why we Christians depend on God's grace. If God does not forgive us, none of us would have the slightest chance of salvation. And if the Spirit of Christ did not come to us and change us from the inside out, none of us would have any possibility of becoming truly righteous people.

A sincere Muslim must seek to do the impossible, achieve true righteousness on his own. And he believes that if he fails he will be judged without mercy and condemned to eternal punishment.

The more I learn about the Muslim's faith, the more grateful I am for the revelation of God we have in Christ. The Muslim God would never take flesh and come

to earth to suffer and die for us. It is beneath his dignity. But Christ has shown us that God's love for us is far more important than maintaining dignity.

I know that Christians complain about the doctrine of the Trinity. There have been some who reject it altogether. When you do, you end up with a God like that of the Muslims--and the Jews—high and lifted up, unapproachable. We can be grateful that we worship and serve a God who is, at one and the same time, high and lifted up, but who is also a human being and shares our struggles and our pain, and who also comes to us as the Holy Spirit and lives in our hearts.

I am grateful that our God recognizes that we are so weighed down by the demands of the flesh and the struggle to live that we cannot possibly be good enough to win salvation on our own. We are sinners whose only hope for salvation is God's grace. We don't worship and serve a God who sits and watches us from above to see if we can make it on our own. We serve a God who cares so much for us to come to us and share our struggle with us and who enables us to grow in righteousness. We serve a God who walks with us every step of the way and gives us encouragement and strength and guidance. Our God is not a dispassionate observer and judge. Our God is a loving parent, who loves us more than power or prestige or honor even life itself. Our God is one who is willing to suffer and die for us.

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