

Christians and Muslims
Matthew 5:43-48

Last week I talked about the similarities and differences between Christianity and Islam. The basic similarity is that we both worship the God of Abraham. Christians and Muslims agree that the God of Abraham is one God, a personal God, creator and ruler of heaven and earth, holy and righteous, who wants us to be holy and righteous as well. Our basic differences are these: The Muslims believe in a Unitarian God--that is that God is one person. We believe in the Trinity. We believe in one God who is three persons, eternally united in love and in purpose. We believe that God is the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. We believe that Jesus is the eternal Son of God, and we believe that the Holy Spirit is God present with us. The second basic difference is that the Muslims believe that God is first and foremost holy and righteous. There is a barrier between heaven and earth, which protects God's holiness from being tarnished by the sinfulness in this world. God would never leave the holiness of heaven to come and fellowship with us. And God will only allow those who achieve righteousness in this lifetime to enter heaven. We believe God is first and foremost gracious and loving, which means that, despite our sinfulness, God is willing to forgive us and wants to fellowship with us. God has come to us in Christ and dwells in us through the Holy Spirit. We believe that we cannot become righteous unless we allow the Spirit of Christ to come into our hearts and transform us.

To Hindus and Buddhists and other religions these differences between Christians and Muslims would not seem to be very important. To us they are very important.

Today I want to ask this question: How are we, as Christians, to relate to Muslims? As I was saying last week, we can no longer simply ignore them. We no longer live in separate worlds. They are here among us, and we are there in the Middle East. They are our neighbors, our business associates, our friends, even our relatives. As I said last week, my daughter-in-law is a Muslim. Our sons and daughters are dying in battles with Muslims. Our economy is largely dependent on oil from Muslim countries. Nearly one-third of the population of the world is Muslim, and they will eventually outnumber Christians, maybe in our lifetimes. We cannot ignore them. How are we to live with them?

I hope the answer is obvious: We are to love them. As Christians we are to follow Jesus' teaching to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Are Muslims our neighbors? Someone asked Jesus a very similar question. One of those who heard Jesus say that we are to love our neighbors asked him, "Who is our neighbor?" Jesus answered him with the Parable of the Good Samaritan. It's the story of a Jew who was beaten and robbed and left for dead along a desert road. He was saved by the extravagant kindness of a Samaritan, a man who belonged to a race of people who also worshipped the God of Abraham, but who were hated and despised by the Jews. Jesus ended the parable by asking, "Who was a neighbor to the man?" In the Parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus is telling us that we ought to follow the example of this

Samaritan man. He treated a man like he was his neighbor who was from a different country, a different race, and a different religion, a man who actually despised him.

The question we Christians need to ask ourselves is this: Will we act like Christians or not? The strangest thing in the world we can do is to hate people in the name of Christ.

You may have seen the religious section of the Houston Chronicle last Sunday. The religion editor sent out a question to the leading spokespersons for several different religions. The question was, "What is the most dangerous idea in religion?" Each of them gave long, convoluted answers. Most of them, I think, missed the mark completely. Here is my answer to that question: The most dangerous idea in religion is to believe we have the right to punish people who don't believe what we believe. By punish, I mean everything from torturing and killing people, to discriminating against people, to being impolite to people, to shunning and ignoring people.

Much of Jesus' ministry was spent healing people who were hurt by Pharisees, who believed very much that they had the right and the obligation to punish people who didn't act and believe as they did. That's why they were so upset that Jesus ate with sinners. He was rescuing them from being ostracized, which was the way the punishment the Pharisees were inflicting on them for not believing and acting correctly.

Jesus said, "Judge not, that you be not judged." We are to leave judging up to God. We are not qualified to pass judgment. We are to love all people. We are to treat all people with dignity and respect.

What about those who feel they have the right and even the responsibility to punish us because we don't believe the way they do?

Sadly, extremist Muslims believe they do have a right and a responsibility to punish those who don't believe as they do. They are carrying on a long tradition of Christians and Muslims punishing each other in terrible ways for not sharing their faiths.

Okay, we agree we should not punish Muslims for rejecting Christianity. But what are we to do about those Muslims who feel they should continue to punish us for rejecting the Islamic faith?

The answer is the same—Love them. Jesus said, "Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you." Jesus didn't just teach this. He practiced it. As Christ was hanging from the cross, he looked at those who were killing him and said, "Father, forgive them. They know not what they do." Jesus lived what he taught. He taught that we are to forgive those who have sinned against us. He calls us to follow his teaching and his example. It is the way to eternal life.

To do anything less is to be unchristian.

When we allow others to cause us to act in an unchristian way, Satan wins. When I was in seminary Madelyn Murray O'Hare came to SMU. She and a man named Bob Harrington, a Christian evangelist who was known as "The Chaplain of Bourbon Street," were touring college campuses holding a debate. Madelyn Murray O'Hare, who was an evangelist for atheism, was arguing that while Christians talked about being loving, they were really hateful, intolerant people. Now, Madelyn Murray O'Hare had the most grating personality of anyone I have ever encountered. She didn't just argue her point. She tried to humiliate the person she was debating. Several of the students tried to debate her. All of them ended up losing their tempers and saying very hateful things to her. And O'Hare would fold her arms, sit back and smile, with a look on her face that said, "I

told you so.” However, in the end she lost the debate. Bob Harrington was a true Christian. Throughout the debate he responded to her with kindness, love, humor and respect. At the end of the debate, she thanked him for his graciousness. He was living proof that at least some Christians truly are loving people. Wouldn't it be wonderful if all Christians could be like Bob Harrington?

So, how are we, as Christians to relate to Muslims? Love them. Treat them with courtesy, kindness and respect. Affirm their good qualities and deeds. Remember that they are children of God, loved by God as much as we are. We are to love them as much as we love one another. They are our neighbors.

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