

## Right Questions, Wrong Answers: A Study of World Religions

### • Lesson Three •

#### What Is God Like?

1. God is holy; he demands perfection
2. God is love; he has shown his love to all

## Worship

A meditation on Psalm 130, a psalm that emphasizes the holiness and love of God

**Leader:** Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD;

**Group:** O Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy.

**Leader:** If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins,

**Group:** O Lord, who could stand?

**All:** Lord, to you I make confession: I have sinned and gone astray; I have multiplied transgression, Chosen for myself my way. Led by you to see my errors, Lord, I tremble at your terrors. (CW 302:1)

**Leader:** But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared.

**Group:** I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I put my hope. **Leader:**

My soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning, **Group:** More than watchmen wait for the morning.

**All:** Your love and grace alone avail To blot out my transgression. The best and holiest deeds must fail To break sin's dread oppression. Before you none can boasting stand, But all must fear your strict demand And live alone by mercy. Therefore my hope is in the Lord And not in my own merit; It rests upon his faithful Word To them of contrite spirit. That he is merciful and just—This is my comfort and my trust. His help I wait with patience. (CW 305:2,3)

**Leader:** O Israel, put your hope in the LORD, for with the LORD is unfailing love and with him is full redemption.

**Group:** He himself will redeem Israel from all their sins.

**All:** Lord, on you I cast my burden—Sink it in the depths below! Let me know your gracious pardon; Wash me, make me white as snow. Let your Spirit leave me never; Make me only yours forever. (CW 302:4)

**Prayer:** Lord God, Father in heaven, we praise you for your mercy in leading us to know the truth about you. Help us, through the portions of your Word that we study today, gain a firmer grasp on your grace. Fill our hearts with a sense of awe so that we, your dear children, marvel at your holiness, humbly rejoice in your love, and gladly offer ourselves to your service. Amen.

## Introduction

Some blind men examined portions of an elephant and were asked to describe what an elephant looked like. The man who had examined the elephant’s leg said that the elephant must look like a tree. The one who had felt the elephant’s torso said that the elephant must look like a wall. Another had felt its trunk and thought it must look like a snake. They all were wrong, of course. Because they knew only one part of the elephant, they had distorted images of it. People can have a distorted picture of God if they know and emphasize only certain characteristics of God to the neglect of others.

What would happen if we thought *only* of God as holy and hating sin?

We would have a distorted picture of God. If we thought only of God as holy, we would have to be deathly afraid of him. We would consider it best to avoid him. If we honestly evaluated ourselves and our sin, we could have no hope for life here or hereafter.

What would happen if we thought *only* of God’s love and mercy?

We would have an equally distorted picture of God. We would not worry about the curse of sin or about submitting to anything he had to say. We would become blind to his standard of holiness and would forget our need for a Savior.

All God’s attributes are important for us. The two that are most critical to our faith are his holiness and his love. Neglect God’s holiness and become blind to God’s standard of right and wrong. Neglect his love and become hopeless. If we understand how they work together, though, we will understand Scripture. We will know exactly what God is like. In Scripture, God tells us what he is like and leads us to an accurate picture of himself.

## Studying God’s Word

### God is holy; he demands perfection

Read Romans 2:1-16.

1. Human beings are very good at justifying their sins. How do some reason their sin away? (verses 3 and 4)

Some say, “My sins are not as bad as the guy who is on death row.” They often pass judgment on the sins of others, forgetting that they have committed the same sins, at least in their hearts. Some say, “If my sins are so bad, then why hasn’t God punished me as he has punished others?” They forget that God is being merciful and kind in seeking to bring us to repentance.

2. There is one sin that ultimately will bring God’s judgment. What is it? (verse 5)

Unbelief, or to use Paul’s words here, “stubbornness” and an “unrepentant heart.” Those who reject God’s gracious overtures store up wrath for themselves.

3. How does God demonstrate his holiness? (verses 5-10)

He will reveal his righteous judgment on the Last Day, punishing all unbelievers on the basis of their deeds. Since it is impossible to please God without faith, every last one of their deeds will be judged as sinful. He will demonstrate his holiness by staying true to his Word of promise to bless those who have believed and sought after his righteousness. He will show wrath and anger to all who have rejected him.

4. Explain the words of the apostle: “God does not show favoritism.” (verse 11-12)

God will judge people apart from their nationalities. He will not allow a Jew who has rejected him to have eternal life simply because he or she is a Jew. He will not punish a Greek who persists in doing good simply because he or she is a Greek.

5. What proof does Paul offer that no one can claim to be ignorant of God’s holiness? (verses 14 and 15)

Every person has a conscience and knows that there is a God who demands perfect obedience. Every person must conclude that God is holy.

6. Many claim that as long as they do the right things and avoid hurting others, they will not offend God. How does the last verse refute that claim?

God doesn’t judge by external actions alone. He searches hearts and judges man’s secrets. He demands holiness, even in the inner recesses of the heart, which no one but God can see.

## How do the other religions deal with their god’s justice?

**Islam:** Allah is perfectly just and holy and will ultimately judge all at the end of the world. Yet Allah’s justice is not the same as the absolute justice of the one true God because Muslims contend that it is possible to find acceptance with Allah by doing more good than evil.

**Judaism:** With an emphasis on the works that human beings are to perform in this world and with the idea that God will come to judge the world, Judaism would seem to come down on the side of a holy God who expects perfect obedience. However, since forgiveness can be found through works, the God of Judaism is not absolutely just.

**Hinduism:** Brahman, the Absolute Being, is without attributes. He is not holy and just, the way the God of the Bible is. Some of the lesser deities may be considered holy and just, but perfect obedience is not demanded. A person’s misdeeds in life simply dictate the place of his or her next incarnation.

**Buddhism:** Because strict Buddhism has no god, it is not right to speak of a just god. However, with its emphasis on karma and reincarnation, Buddhism does have an idea of justice. If people do wrong, they accrue bad karma, which negatively impacts the situation in which they will find themselves in their next incarnations.

### His Word in My Life—Option 1

Hinduism teaches that Brahman, the Supreme, is without attributes. He is not described as being absolutely holy. Though there are many individual deities to whom Hindus turn, they are all lesser deities. None of them demand perfect obedience from all. For a Hindu, the damage done via misdeeds (there is no real concept of sin as we know it) is not all that severe. Misdeeds simply hinder the Hindu’s progress in life, and he may be forced to come back in another life to try again.

1. Why would this concept of God be appealing?

It appeals to people because, by nature, no one wants to submit to a holy God. People want to be the ultimate judges of what is right and wrong. They don’t want to be bothered by this idea of sin because they want to be guilt free, regardless of their actions. Ultimately, this concept is appealing because it allows the person to take the place of God in determining the propriety of a certain action.

2. Christians are not immune to such theology. How does this thinking show up in our lives?

We are not immune to this thinking because of the old Adam that struggles for supremacy in our hearts. When we allow the world’s definition of right and wrong to temper God’s definition, we are beginning to embrace the idea that God doesn’t actually desire perfect obedience. Sometimes we may think that God simply wants us to do what we can do and not to bother with aiming for perfection. But God doesn’t say, “Do your best.” He says, “Be holy, because I am holy.” If we fail to appreciate the strict demands of the law, we will not appreciate the gracious beauty of the gospel.

Islam teaches that Allah is holy and that he desires people to submit to him. In fact, the name Islam means “submission,” and a Muslim is one who submits to Allah. To submit to Allah you must submit to the Five Pillars. The Five Pillars are as follows:

- (1) Confessing that “there is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his prophet”
- (2) Ritual prayer, five times each day facing Mecca
- (3) Almsgiving—giving 1/40 of possessions to those who need it most
- (4) Fasting—abstaining from food, drink, and sexual relations from sunrise until sunset in the month of Ramadan
- (5) Pilgrimage to Mecca and to Muhammad’s tomb in Medina at least once in life

1. How does this concept of God differ from Scripture’s picture of God?

God is holy and demands perfect obedience from all his creatures. The commands of Islam are not the commands of God. Nowhere does he limit the obedience he seeks from his people to five pillars. God demands more than external obedience; he wants perfect obedience in the heart.

2. How might such thinking enter into our hearts and lives?

We may consider certain commands of God more important than others and focus our lives on obedience to a couple of his commands. We may create our own ways to serve him—our own “Five Pillars,” if you will—by which we hope to bring God an obedience with which he is pleased. We may focus on externals instead of serving him from the heart.

*A god who isn’t all that concerned with obedience certainly appeals to sinful human beings. But such a god doesn’t exist. The true God is holy and demands perfection in action and in thought. He continually searches hearts and judges attitudes. He demonstrates his holiness by punishing unbelief with the fires of hell. To see God as anything but holy is to invite his wrath and punishment.*

*But the one true God is not only absolutely holy; he is also perfectly loving.*

## **God is love; he has shown his love to all**

### **Read Romans 3:21-31.**

1. When it comes to love, talk is cheap. How did God show his love for all? (verses 21-26)

God gave his Son as the atoning sacrifice for the sins of all people (not just the Jews). Because of that sacrifice, God declared all people innocent of all sin.

2. In spiritual matters God acts, and human beings simply receive. Pick out the words in verses 21-24 that prove this.

The righteousness comes “from God.” It comes “*through* faith,” not *because* of faith. All are declared righteous before God “freely,” without any payment from us. “By his grace” indicates that human beings paid no price to be considered righteous by God. “The redemption that came by Christ Jesus” indicates that God had to act on behalf of human beings and rescue them.

3. What’s wrong with this, albeit well-intentioned, statement: God turned a blind eye to our sinful thoughts and actions? (verses 25 and 26)

God demonstrated his justice at the cross, punishing his Son for our sins. From our vantage point, it appears as if God turned a blind eye to our sinful thoughts. But the reality is that he saw our sinful thoughts and actions very clearly, for they covered his Son. He didn’t shove our sins under a rug, out of sight. Rather, he brought them into full view on his Son so he could forget them as far as we are concerned.

4. How does God’s loving action change us? (verses 27 and 28)

In bringing his gospel to us, he has led us to reject boasting in our own deeds as deserving of God’s favor. He has led us to rely on Jesus and his works as our way to God’s favor.

5. To “uphold the law” means to obey it. In what way does our Christian faith “uphold the law?” (verse 31)

Some might caricature Christianity as a religion that makes obedience to the law unnecessary for salvation. We do not reject the law nor consider obedience to the law as a matter of small importance. Everyone who wants to go to heaven must obey the law perfectly. Our Christian faith upholds the law because we cling to Jesus, who obeyed the law perfectly in our place. God looks at us and sees people who have rendered flawless obedience in every situation.

## How loving is the god of these other religions?

**Islam:** Allah, throughout the Koran, is called the Merciful and Compassionate. Allah’s mercy and compassion show in ways that do not directly pertain to human beings entering paradise. Allah’s mercy is evident in creation and in preservation and in all the good things of life, but there is no mention of Allah providing a sure and certain substitute who has borne the sins of all. Muslims cannot be sure that Allah will be merciful to them when judgment day arrives, for they cannot be sure that their actions will satisfy Allah’s justice.

**Judaism:** God is merciful and compassionate. The Tanach is filled with references to the Lord’s mercy and love. Yet the Lord’s love is reserved for those who obey him. For some that means following to the letter all the laws of the Torah. For others that means loving God above all and loving their neighbor. The Lord’s love is conditioned upon the proper action and attitude of the people.

**Hinduism:** The lesser gods are generally portrayed as loving, in the sense that they provide something for human beings. But they do not provide deliverance from the wheel of karma into the state of bliss. They do not act at cost to themselves for the good of all people.

**Buddhism:** There is no loving god in Buddhism who acts on behalf of people. The only way for someone to find release from suffering is to follow the proper lifestyle.

### His Word in My Life—Option 1

Allah, in the Koran, is frequently described as being merciful and compassionate. But Allah cannot reach out to the world and redeem it by grace. That would be an insult to his righteousness. The burden, then, falls upon human beings. They must rescue themselves by piling up more good deeds than bad. Your Muslim friends can only hope that they will have done enough to please Allah so that they can avoid hell.

1. In what way is the Christian faith far superior to Islam?

Christianity offers certainty; Islam only offers an uncertain hope. While a Muslim only *hopes* that Allah will be merciful, a Christian *knows* that God is merciful. A Muslim only hopes that he has offered enough obedience, while the Christian knows that Jesus' obedience was perfect and that the Christian is innocent in the eyes of God. A Christian knows that God has shown compassion in reaching out to the world through his Son's perfect life and death.

2. Muslims can only hope that they will have done enough to please Allah so that they can avoid hell. How does knowing that affect the way in which you might witness to a Muslim friend?

This would seem to be a stress point for Muslims. If they really ponder what will happen at the end of the world, they must have more than a little doubt that all will go well with them on that day. This would be a good place to start when you are trying to share your faith. Ask your Muslim friend if he's one hundred percent sure that Allah will show him compassion on the Last Day. If he expresses any uncertainty (and he should), you have an opportunity to witness. Share with him the reason for your confidence to stand before God (Allah) clinging to Jesus' work and righteousness. Know that you can offer him a sure thing instead of an uncertain hope; you can witness confidently.

You might say something like this: "You're absolutely right in saying that God is righteous. He is serious about wanting his law to be fully obeyed. You're right—he cannot let sin go unpunished and remain a righteous God. The problem is that we can't fully obey the law. We may try, and sometimes we may actually outwardly obey some of God's commands, but we have not obeyed and cannot obey his every command. We all have fallen short. But God's compassion moved him to act on our behalf. He sent Jesus into the world to do what we could not—live in perfect obedience to the law. God punished our sins on Jesus—every one—the ones in the past and the ones still in the future. God let *us* off the hook because he punished *Jesus* instead."

Judaism, like Islam, proclaims a merciful and compassionate God. The Old Testament is, after all, filled with pictures of God's love. Yet Jewish people do not see God acting on their behalf to rescue them from the punishment their sins deserve. Your Jewish coworker thinks that God will show his love to those who demonstrate themselves worthy of it by obeying the will of God. For some Jews that means following the Old Testament law to the letter. For others it means loving God and loving their neighbor.

3. Why does Judaism, given its less-than-comforting message, have such a large group of adherents?

It contains a veneer of spirituality, appealing to those who have drowned out the sound of their consciences. It appeals to the self-assured individual, giving that person the chance to "pull herself up by the bootstraps." It seems far more reasonable and sensible than the message of Christianity, which *seems* to belittle sin and to allow an easy way out.

4. How might strains of Judaism enter our thinking?

Here are strains of that same thinking: “God will love me *if* I obey his commandments.” “God will forgive me *if* I do what he says.” “God will show compassion *if* I try harder to do the right thing and help the people around me.” Those statements may not come out of our mouths, but they certainly spook around in our hearts. In an effort not to take advantage of God’s compassion, we sometimes want to make God’s love and forgiveness dependent on our actions. We need to hear again and again the comforting message of Scripture—God loves us just because he loves us. He loves us because he is love, not because we have something to offer him. Before we were even born, before we could do a single thing to merit his attention, God loved us and put his Son to death for us.

5. Respond, in a respectful way, to a Hindu who says, “Do your best in life, and everything will be all right.”

You might say something like this: “Are you sure that your best will be good enough? Sometimes, even when I have tried my best, I know that I haven’t done all that I should have done. Maybe you’ve felt that same way. That’s because God has given us consciences that accuse us of falling short of his standard. He demands perfection, not simply the best we have to offer. Our best will never be good enough. Our best will only condemn us to suffering in hell. The good news is that Jesus did everything we couldn’t do. He obeyed every law of God and suffered the hell that we deserve. God promises that those who rest on Jesus’ death and resurrection will be more than all right. Those who believe will live with God forever.”

*Though many religions speak of a merciful and compassionate God, only the God of the Bible demonstrates himself to be truly loving and compassionate. God laid the world’s sins on Jesus and credited Jesus’ righteousness to the world. God is absolutely holy and perfectly loving at the same time. This is the reason we can face our dying days with confidence.*

## Summary

It seems to be a contradiction. It seems that God can be either holy or loving, not both. Only in Jesus can we understand those two attributes of God. At the cross it all comes together. There God’s holiness exacts a severe punishment. There the sin-covered Son of God endures hell itself. But there God shows his love for sinful human beings. There he graciously forgives the sins of the world. There God, through his Son’s innocent death, grants life to all. Other religions have no such event in which to base their hope of God’s love and eternal life with him.

## Life with God

During the week, read the following passages, which talk about God’s holiness and love. Day 1:

Psalm 5—Notice the absolute holiness and perfect love of God standing side by side.

Day 2: Exodus 34:1-7—The Lord reveals himself as compassionate and holy at the same time. Day 3:

Isaiah 53:3-6—The Lord promised to put our sin on Jesus so that we might be healed. Day 4:

Matthew 27:45-49—At the cross the holiness and love of God come together.

Day 5: Romans 10:25-36—His holiness and love are beyond our understanding and the powers of reason.

Day 6: Psalm 115:1-8—All glory be to God for preserving us from the folly of idol worship!