

Right Questions, Wrong Answers: A Study of World Religions

• Lesson Five •

What Must I Do to Be Saved?

1. It is impossible for human beings to save themselves
2. God graciously gives life to those who trust his promises

Worship

A meditation based on various passages from Scripture*

Leader: Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.”

Group: **The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.**

Leader: Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.”

Group: **Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.**

Leader: When he had received the drink, Jesus said, “It is finished.” With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

Group: **Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.**

All: **The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.**

*Psalm 23:1-6; John 10:11-18; 19:30

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you are the Good Shepherd. In love you freely offered your life in our place and poured out your holy blood for our sins. We raise our hearts and voices to you in joy and thanksgiving, for your death gives us life and your rising gives us hope and a future. Increase our faith through the study of your Word. Lead us to throw away our works and cling only to your merits. Drive away our doubts and grant us peace of heart and mind that we may stand with confidence and eagerly await the day of your returning. Amen.

Introduction

We live in an age of fine print. Sweetheart deals that seem too good to be true generally are. Experience has taught us that nothing is free. Everything comes at a price (just read the fine print). Sadly, people think the same principle applies in spiritual matters. They suppose it necessary to pay their own way. But in the bold, clear print of Scripture, God instructs us that deliverance from the guilt and punishment of sin comes to us in a different way—through Christ.

In this lesson we will study this truth and see how other religions teach just the opposite.

Studying God's Word

It is impossible for human beings to save themselves

Read Mark 10:17-27.

1. What impression do you receive of the young man in verse 17?

He must have been a religious, spiritually minded man to come running to Jesus as he did. He had a healthy respect for all who were recognized as spiritual teachers, as his falling on his knees signifies. The young man was wise enough to ask the most important question anyone can ask. He did not completely understand whom he was addressing, though, calling him simply "good teacher."

2. Jesus knew that the rich young man couldn't earn his way to eternal life. Jesus could have said, "Believe in me, because I am here to die for your sins." Why don't you think he said this? (verse 19)

Jesus wanted the young man to recognize his desperate need for a Savior. In the law preaching that followed, Jesus aimed to open the young man's eyes to see how sinful he was by nature. Then he could announce himself as the Redeemer of the world. You can't give medicine to someone who doesn't recognize that he is sick.

3. Why was the young man disappointed with Jesus' initial response to his question?

Jesus was renowned as a wise teacher. The young man wanted to know what additional things he could do to get closer to God. The commandments that Jesus cited were so basic that obedience to them didn't seem to offer any special growth. He may have been wondering how so many had been deceived into thinking that Jesus was a good teacher.

4. Jesus diagnosed the young man's situation by saying, "One thing you lack." What was that one thing? (verse 21)

He lacked true faith in God. He loved his riches more than he loved God. He certainly didn't fear, love, and trust in God above all things. The man thought he had kept all the commandments, but he couldn't even get past the First Commandment.

5. Why is it impossible for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God? (verses 23-25)

The rich must get past the great hurdle of their riches. But it is really impossible for anyone to enter the kingdom of God because everyone's heart is steeped in idolatry from birth. Only when God works faith in the heart through the gospel in Word and sacrament can a person enter the kingdom of God.

6. What is Jesus' simple answer to this important question: "What must I do to be saved?" (verse 27)

There is nothing we can do to earn eternal life. Our focus and attention ought not be on what we can do for God, but on what God has already done for us in Christ. Jesus tells us to despair of our ability to save ourselves. Instead, we are to look to the one who can do all things, the one who has rescued all people from the hell they deserve.

How do followers of other religions gain salvation?

Islam: The Five Pillars are the most important works a Muslim must do to earn a favorable judgment from Allah.

- (1) The Creed: “There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his prophet.” That must be said with conviction sometime during life. Most repeat it many times a day.
- (2) Ritual prayer: Prayers are said five times a day, at set times, with set postures and rituals, facing Mecca.
- (3) Almsgiving: 1/40 of all that a person possesses must be given to those in need.
- (4) Fasting: During the month of Ramadan, Muslims are to refrain from food, drink, and sexual intercourse from sunrise to sunset.
- (5) The pilgrimage to Mecca: Those who are financially able should travel to Mecca once during their lives.

Judaism: Judaism teaches that all Jews are, in essence, saved by virtue of their connection to Abraham. People are considered naturally good and, therefore, capable of resisting evil. By resisting evil and living in line with God’s commands, they can present themselves to God as worthy of forgiveness. If Jews fail to resist evil, they can atone for their sins by sincere repentance and by striving to help others and serve God.

Hinduism: There are three main ways to find release from the cycle of rebirth. (1) The way of knowledge: Intense meditation delivers a person from the idea that he or she is separate from Brahman, the “world soul,” and ultimate reality. (2) The way of works: Carrying out prescribed duties, such as reciting scriptures, worshiping various gods, fasting, or going on pilgrimages. (3) The way of devotion: Public and private worship of a specific god is seen as a way to approach Brahman and to loosen the world’s grip. This is the most popular way to Moksha [soul’s liberation from the karma that causes reincarnation].

Buddhism: The way to remove suffering from life is to follow the Noble Eightfold Path:

- (1) Right knowledge: understanding that suffering comes from desire and attachment to this existence
- (2) Right attitude: freeing one’s self from sensual desire, hatred, and malice
- (3) Right speech: not gossiping or lying; wise, truthful words are to be the norm
- (4) Right action: showing proper moral behavior
- (5) Right occupation: earning a living in a way that doesn’t hurt others
- (6) Right effort: striving for noble thoughts and attitudes
- (7) Right mindfulness: carefully considering words and actions
- (8) Right composure: centering concentration within, rather than on things of this existence

His Word in My Life

The Koran says and Muslims believe, “They who set their face Godward and do what is right—their reward is therefore with their Lord, and no fear shall come on them, neither shall they be grieved.”

What does such a statement fail to take into account?

It fails to take into account that every person in the world carries around a sinful nature that wants nothing to do with good and everything to do with evil. That statement assumes that people have the innate ability to turn to God and to live in a way that pleases him. Unfortunately, no one can turn to God on his own. No one can bring to God a service that pleases him. Only God can give a person the ability to perform an act in which God delights.

Your Muslim friend has probably spent more time reading the Bible than you have spent reading the Koran. In response to your words of witness, he may very well point to the Bible and say, “Your Bible teaches that those who do good will live and those who do evil will be condemned.” How would you answer your friend?

Those words are an acceptable summary of one of the teachings of the Bible: the law. The law says that those who continually seek to serve God and serve neighbor, and do so perfectly, will live. If anyone can, in thought, word, and action, offer complete obedience to God and service to fellowman, he or she will live. Though the law makes that promise, it doesn't assume that anyone can do it. In fact, the purpose of the law is to show everyone that it is impossible for human beings to be perfect. No matter how hard we try, we all fall short of his glory and merit condemnation. The only way we can avoid condemnation is if someone suffers that condemnation for us and offers to us his righteousness. That is exactly what Jesus did for us. Now God credits Jesus' holy life to our account and considers us to be the ones who have continually done good works.

Also, keep in mind the fact that often Scripture describes Christians according to their fruits of faith, which Christians know come only because they believe in Jesus' forgiveness and grace.

A Hindu, unlike a Muslim, does not look for deliverance to a paradise. Instead, he or she simply seeks to be released from the spinning wheel of death and birth. The way to such deliverance (Moksha or Mukti) is to follow one of three ways: The way of works (carrying out prescribed Hindu practices), the way of knowledge (consisting of strict self-discipline and focused meditation), or the way of devotion (worshiping of a particular deity).

What do all three ways have in common?

They all focus on an individual's ability to draw near to God and to merit some payment from God through his works. They all fail to realize the depravity of fallen human beings.

Though Christians reject work-righteousness, they may fall prey to an internal work-righteousness similar to that of a Hindu. In what ways?

We may begin to think that forgiveness comes to us because we confess our sinfulness to God. (But God forgives because of Jesus' sacrifice on Calvary's cross, not because of words we may utter.) Or we may suppose that God forgives us because we pray often and we read our Bibles regularly. (God is gracious to us not because we are good children, but because he is gracious.) Perhaps we could also begin to think that our efforts to glorify him are instrumental in our receiving God's blessing.

The sinful nature with which all people are born will always believe that there is one way to be right with God: earn his favor. The old Adam is as self-righteous and work oriented as can be. The world's religions call on people to live according to prescribed rules and follow certain paths to merit God's blessing. These religions are appealing because they cater to the old Adam.

God graciously gives life to those who trust his promises

Read Galatians 3:1-14.

1. Explain: Abraham didn't do a single thing and yet God considered him righteous. (verse 6)

Believing and doing are exact opposites. To believe is simply to accept what someone says as true. Abraham accepted God's Word of promise as truth, and God considered Abraham righteous. God considered him righteous not because Abraham's faith was so strong but because God's promise was so certain.

2. The Judaizers likely told their listeners that all true children of Abraham would certainly submit themselves to the ceremonial laws given by God to Israel. What does Paul say in response? (verse 7)

Children of Abraham don't do; they accept. They don't rely in any way on their works. Instead, they trust the Lord's promise that Jesus has fulfilled the law in their place and gives life to all who trust in him.

3. In what ways have all nations been blessed through Abraham? (verses 8 and 9)

The Messiah, who came from Abraham's line, came into the world to rescue all people from the guilt and punishment of sin. Also, all have been blessed through Abraham because they have learned from his example that the Lord justifies through faith. As Abraham believed God's promise and was considered righteous by God, so we believe God's promise that the Lord Jesus died for our sins and that we are considered righteous through that faith.

4. How do righteousness before God and eternal life come to us? (verse 14)

Objectively, they come through Jesus Christ, who gave up his life for all people that they might live forever. Subjectively, they become our own through faith in Jesus' work on our behalf, faith that the Spirit of God works in our hearts through the gospel in Word and sacrament.

What blessings do followers of other religions receive?

Islam: Those who persistently adhere to the Five Pillars and submit to Muslim canon law will cause the scales to weigh in their favor on the day of judgment. They can hope to receive forgiveness from Allah and be given a life of unending pleasure thereafter.

Judaism: Those who study the Torah and the Talmud and endeavor to live according to the law of the Lord will find blessing in this life. Most Jews don't think that there is anything after this life that they could receive. Some Jews hope for a life after this one as a reward for the good works they have done.

Hinduism: By following one of the three ways of salvation, Hindus release themselves from the cycle of rebirth. A Hindu may give credit to a god or to Brahman for the release, but ultimately the person alone achieves moksha.

Buddhism: Traditional Buddhism promises nirvana to those who have followed the Noble Eightfold Path. Nirvana is the absence of ties to existence and therefore the end of suffering. While traditional Buddhism (Theravada) primarily describes nirvana as the removal of suffering, the broader Buddhism (Mahayana) pictures it as a paradise.

His Word in My Life

Many Jews today are so focused on this life that they don't bother to ask this question: "What must I do to be saved?" The ones who are concerned about the life that follows this one are confident that God will be gracious to them because they are Jews and because they believe in him.

How is that faith any different from the Christian faith?

It is as different as day and night. Christians are confident that God will be gracious to them upon death because the Lord Jesus died in their place. They know that God is just and will keep his promise to give life to those who trust in him. [The object of faith – what faith is based on.]

Your Muslim neighbor may talk a great deal about believing. He believes in Allah. He believes that Allah is all-gracious and all-compassionate. He believes that Allah will be merciful to him if he does enough good deeds. The Koran says that on the Last Day “those whose scales are heavy, they are successful. Those whose scales are light are those who lose their souls, in hell abiding.”

Explain: The Muslim cannot have the same certainty about salvation that a Christian has.

The Muslim always must wonder if he has done enough to placate God. He cannot be certain that the scales are weighing in his favor.

The Christian knows that the Lord Jesus, his substitute, did everything that God required in his law. The Savior's death was a payment for every one of our sins. Because the Christian can look away from himself and his works, he can be certain about his eternal home. Because the Christian can look to the unshakeable promise of God, he can be sure that he will spend the rest of his days with the Lord. This would obviously be a great way to share your faith with a Muslim. Ask him how certain he is that he will be found righteous on the Last Day. Then tell him why you are certain you will be found righteous on the Last Day.

How might similar thinking manifest itself in a Christian's life?

When a Christian is not living the kind of life we would like to see from a Christian, we may start to act as if the way to heaven is by works and not by faith. This is not at all to say that sin is acceptable. But there are different levels of Christian living. Our lives of service to God will never be perfect; we will continue to struggle to serve him the way we would like to serve him. We must be on guard that a focus on the Christian life doesn't lead us into work-righteous thinking. We don't want to drift into thinking that we must keep filling our scales so that God remembers whom to rescue on the Last Day. We want to continue to offer ourselves to him and to demonstrate our thankfulness with our lives, but we are to do so with no thought of gaining something from God as payment for our good works.

Because it is impossible for human beings to save themselves, a gracious God chose to act. He sent his Son into the world to rescue all people from the guilt and punishment of their sins. From beginning to end, God is the actor. He graciously gives. We simply receive. This is a refreshing relief from the work-righteous themes of other religions.

Summary

“What must I do to be saved?” is the most important question anyone can ever ask. The answer a person gives to that question is a matter of eternal life and death. Non-Christian religions hold out happiness to their members, but that happiness must be earned in various ways.

Those who allow themselves to be instructed by God's Word know that they cannot gain eternal life on their own. God graciously gives eternal life to those who despise their own works and look alone to Jesus' merits. Those people do not earn life by their works or even by believing. God does it all.

Life with God

Day 1: Read Romans 9:30–10:17. Righteousness is by faith, not by works.

Day 2: Read Ephesians 2:1-10. By grace we are saved, through faith.

Day 3: Read John 3:1-20. Everyone who believes has everlasting life.

Day 4: Read John 6:25-59. No one can believe unless God graciously grants faith.

Day 5: Read Acts 16:16-34. “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.”

Day 6: Read Psalm 32. The Lord graciously forgives our sins and considers us righteous.