

Right Questions, Wrong Answers: A Study of World Religions

• Lesson Six •

Who Am I?

1. By nature I am a sinner and an enemy of God
2. By grace through faith I am a child of God

Worship

A meditation based on passages from 1 John*

Leader: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.

Group: If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.

Leader: If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.

Group: If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

Leader: If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.

Group: If anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.

Leader: How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!

Group: The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.

Leader: Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known.

Group: But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.

Leader: May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will.

Group: And may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

All: Jesus, your blood and righteousness My beauty are, my glorious dress; Mid flaming worlds, in these arrayed, With joy shall I lift up my head. (CW 376:1)

*1 John 1:5–2:2; 3:1,2

Prayer: Lord God, our Father in heaven, we do not deserve to be called your children. Each day, through our transgressions, we demonstrate the sin that still lives within our hearts. We give you thanks that in the holy blood of your Son poured out on Calvary’s altar, you cleanse us from all iniquities. For working through water and the Word to instill faith in our hearts and making us your dear children, we offer our humble hymns of praise. Lead us each day to see who we are by nature, that we may appreciate who we are by your grace— your dear children and heirs of everlasting life. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Introduction

It was no longer a conversation, but a monologue. On and on he went. I couldn’t really blame him, I suppose, because he was terribly troubled by the things that he saw going on all around him in the world. After a five-minute discourse on the evils of society and the decline of civilization as he knew it, he made this concluding comment: “I can’t believe that people can do these things to one another. I can’t understand why they steal and kill, without any thought about whom they are hurting.” Had you been the object of such a monologue (maybe you have been), what would you have said?

The best thing to say is: “I can understand why they do it. They are simply giving in to the desires of their sinful natures.” No one is naturally good. All are naturally evil. The reason that some don’t act on their basest intentions is partially because they have grown to fear the punishment the law promises to mete out upon them. The reason that others avoid such acts is because they want to be considered good and upright by others. Some avoid such activities because God has been gracious enough to give them the desire to serve him and the strength to say no to temptation. Though many would blame it on genetics or upbringing, there is a simpler reason for the outbreak of sin: every human being has a sinful nature that wants nothing to do with what is right and everything to do with what is wrong.

In this day of denial, people do not want to talk about who they really are. They want to see themselves as good people who do what is right, to the best of their abilities. They don’t want to hear that maybe they aren’t all that good. They would rather not be told that they can’t stand before God on their own. They would prefer to live with pictures of themselves that have no basis in reality. We turn to God in his Word to hear the truth about who we are.

Studying God’s Word

By nature I am a sinner and an enemy of God

Read Romans 3:9-20.

1. In the beginning of Romans chapter 3, Paul addresses questions frequently posed to him by the Jews. The last of those questions was: “So is being a Jew a disadvantage? Are the Gentiles better off than we are?” What was Paul’s answer? (verse 9)

Neither group has an advantage. There is, in God’s estimation, no difference between Jews and Gentiles when it comes to sin—both are under sin. All are born sinful and are inclined toward evil.

2. What is the difference between saying “I am a sinner” and “I have committed sins”? (verse 9)

In verse 9 the singular *sin* is used, referring to the sinfulness of human beings as opposed to the sinful acts that they commit. Paul is saying that all are sinners. The difference between the two expressions in this question is simple: One is who I am, and the other is what I’ve done. To say, “I am a sinner,” is to confess something far worse about myself than simply to say, “I have committed sins.”

3. Some might argue that human beings are born neutral and then choose to pursue either good or evil. How do verses 10 and 11 answer that argument?

There is no one who is righteous, no one who seeks God. Since all have turned away from God, no one is naturally good or neutral. All are naturally evil and rebellious toward God.

4. What is God’s estimate of people as they are by nature, without God in their lives? (verse 12)

They are worthless. They have nothing to offer God that would attract him to them. They are not intrinsically valuable as members of the human race. Any value they have is a value that God has placed upon them in the life and death of his Son.

5. According to verse 19, why did God give the law?

God gave the law in order to silence anyone who might like to claim innocence before God. Those who try to portray themselves as innocent of any wrongdoing find in the law of God the perfect standard that they cannot reach. God gave the law so that all might realize how miserably they have failed.

6. Agree or disagree: The main purpose of God’s law is to show us how to become right in his sight. (verse 20)

Disagree. The main purpose of God’s law is to reveal how sinful we are. If people think that they can use the law to gain righteous standing before God, they need to hear the first part of verse 20 again: “No one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law.”

According to non-Christian religions, what is man?

Islam: Human beings are creatures of Allah. They are neutral at birth—neither fallen nor saved. Though they are weak, they are essentially good and able to fulfill Allah’s commands. People simply need Allah’s guidance to tell them what they are to believe and how they are to live.

Judaism: Because people are made in the image of God, they are inherently good and able to follow the law of the Lord. Though people have an inclination toward evil, they are able to do enough to receive forgiveness from the Lord for any misdeed.

Hinduism: Human beings are parts of God. They are, therefore, basically good and capable of delivering themselves from samsara.

Buddhism: Human beings are basically good but have a proclivity for becoming too attached to this world. Their desires for things in the world and their attachments to the present existence produces suffering.

His Word in My Life

Muslims believe that people are born innocent (called fitrah). Human beings, to be sure, are often negligent and forgetful, and they can make poor choices. But whatever happens after that, Muslims would say, is the result of outside influence.

1. Why would such a teaching be popular?

This is a more positive-sounding teaching than the Bible’s teaching of the natural sinfulness of all people. Such a teaching gives great credit and honor to human beings and makes utter dependence on God for every blessing unnecessary. Also, it seems to make more sense than the Bible’s teaching. It explains why there are some people who do not believe in God and yet live outwardly honorable and upright lives.

2. Agree or disagree: The environment in which we live determines what kind of people we are and will become.

Disagree. The environment does not determine whether or not we are sinners. Since all of us enter the world as the offspring of two sinful people, we are born completely sinful. We are enemies of God by nature, whether born to an upstanding family or a degenerate family, whether born into poverty or wealth. Our environments can be changed, but our natures remain the same.

Agree. There is benefit in seeing godly living modeled. A child who is taught to know the Lord Jesus as Savior and is led in thankful response to God’s love will likely be a different person than a child who never hears about the Savior and sees only godless living. The primary answer to this question, though, should be “disagree,” because the environment cannot change what we are by nature.

3. What danger is there in thinking that we are by nature neutral?

If we are by nature neutral, we have within us the ability to rescue ourselves. Our focus will change from simple, childlike faith in the Savior to proud self-reliance. Also, to think this is to reject the clear teaching of Scripture.

His Word in My Life

Your Jewish friend believes that all people are made in the image of God. Therefore, they are naturally good and capable of doing what is right. Though an individual may be led astray by an evil inclination, she remains basically good. If the person does something wrong, she can achieve forgiveness through prayer and doing good.

How might you demonstrate to your Jewish friend that human beings are not basically good?

Point to the number of crimes committed each year. If human beings are basically good, why are so many breaking the law? Point to the general lack of morality in our world. If human beings are basically good, why do few respect God’s gift of marriage? You could also point to the fact that no child needs to be taught to be selfish. The best thing to do is to make a comparison between man’s achievement and God’s standard. God wants holiness. In God’s eyes human beings are not holy by nature and, therefore, cannot be considered basically good.

The sinner within us and the world around us would have us believe that we are basically good and able to do right if we simply set our minds to it. However, by nature we are sinners and enemies of God.

By grace through faith I am a child of God

Read Galatians 3:26–4:7.

1. Though every human being is a creature of God, not every human being is a child of God. Explain, in light of verse 26.

Faith is what makes someone a child of God. Though many people may say, “We are all God’s children,” they are saying something that God doesn’t say. He reserves that special name, child, for the one who calls on him in faith.

2. What does a sinner have to do to become a child of God? (verse 27)

A sinner doesn’t have to do anything to become a child of God. The sinner simply receives what God gives. Through the Word of God connected with Holy Baptism, God covers the sinner with Jesus’ righteousness and declares him or her to be a child of God.

3. What glorious things happen when God gives us faith? (verses 28 and 29)

We are united with all other believers, regardless of gender, class, or nationality. We are united with Christ and inherit all that he won at the cross—the forgiveness of sins and life eternal. We are also united with the believers of the past, for we are Abraham’s children.

4. God the Father graciously sent his Son into the world. The Lord Jesus, through his life, death, and resurrection, rescued us from the punishment we deserve. What role does the Holy Spirit play in our becoming children of God? (verses 1-6)

The Spirit opens our eyes to see God’s gracious activity on our behalf. He enables us to believe that God has redeemed us through Jesus’ sacrifice on our behalf. He causes us to confess faith in God as our Father.

5. Every Christian is an heir. What do Christians inherit from God? (verse 7)

The life that God gives to his children begins now and continues forever. The life that Christians have now is not as great and joyous as the life that is to come, when we will be in the presence of God and free from the effects of sin.

Does grace play a role in other religions?

Islam: Ultimately, it is Allah who judges people innocent and grants them entrance into paradise. The individual can make a strong case for that judgment through performance of the Five Pillars and obedience to canon law. But he must always leave it up to Allah to decide whether or not he has done enough to find mercy and compassion on the day of judgment. The individual is responsible for doing all within his power to earn Allah’s favor.

Judaism: Though no person can become perfect through his deeds, the important thing is for the individual to be striving continually to live according to the Lord’s law. If the person is sincere in his endeavors, he is able to receive forgiveness for any misdeed. The Lord is the only one who can forgive, but his forgiveness can be earned.

Hinduism: It is the Hindu’s responsibility to release himself from the cycle of rebirth by following one of the three ways of salvation. The Hindu who chooses to worship a god uses that worship as a means to the end of releasing himself from samsara. The individual must enter into union with Brahman through his own efforts.

Buddhism: The individual must follow the Noble Eightfold Path to detach himself from this existence and to experience the enlightenment of nirvana. The individual has the ability to do so; no one can do it for him.

His Word in My Life

A Muslim believes that a person can, through the appropriate choices in life, do enough good to be considered a child of God.

1. Why is the Christian’s hope a far better one?

Our status as children of God is not based on our performances. We don’t have to wonder whether we have made the appropriate choices and done enough good. We are children of God because Jesus made perfect choices throughout his life and then gave up that life for us on the cross. Through the gospel in Word and sacrament, the Spirit has led us to believe in Jesus as the Redeemer and, in so doing, has made us children of God. We can call God “our Father” with confidence because we know that he has declared us to be his children on the basis of Christ’s work on our behalf. We are privileged to be considered children of God.

2. How might Christians fall into the same way of thinking as Muslims?

Whenever we focus more on what we are going to accomplish for God than on what God has accomplished for us, we are falling into similar faulty theology. For example, we may say, “How can you consider yourself a child of God if you don’t serve on this committee or spend this much time in the work of the church?” We become children of God by God’s grace, through the work of his Son and the work of his Holy Spirit.

Child of God and heir of life—could there be a better position? God Almighty considers us his dear children, not because we are worthy but because he is gracious. When working with people from another religion, remember that they think they have the power to serve their god. They follow the idea that they can save themselves. They have no room for grace. When you witness to them, point out sin and then express the hope you have in Christ.

Summary

Christians who pause to consider their baptisms every day know themselves well. They know that they are sinners by nature, hopelessly lost without the grace of God. But they also know that by grace through faith they are children of God. Washed clean from sin in the water of Baptism, Christians know that they have been clothed with Christ and are heirs of everlasting life. They have a greater hope than that afforded by the other religions in the world. What a tremendous blessing they have to share with those entrapped in false religions.

Life with God

Day 1: Read Psalm 51. King David confesses his sins and his sinfulness before God.

Day 2: Read Genesis 6:1-8. The inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood.

Day 3: Read Ephesians 2:11-22. In Christ we are members of God’s household.

Day 4: Read Romans 7:7-25. The Christian is both saint and sinner at the same time.

Day 5: Read Romans 8:1-16. God graciously made us his children through Christ.

Day 6: Read 1 Peter 1:13–2:2. Living as a child of God in a world of sin.