

October 16, 2016

*World Religions: Islam*

Roman 5:1-9

**Opening words:** Why are you a Christian? Can you answer that question without revealing to the world your prejudices? Your prejudices are not funny, because they expose your ignorance. Can you answer that question without giving your family history? One of the blessings in your life is that you were born into a Christian home. It is nice that your grandfather was a preacher, but Jesus must be your Lord and Savior. Can you answer that question without mentioning your relationships within the church? You can make friends anywhere. Can anyone here answer the question, why are you a Christian, with sound theological reasoning? This sermon series, *World Religions*, is designed to help you answer the question, why are you a Christian, using basic Christian theology. Each one of the other world religions has theological flaws. To date, we have looked at Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and Judaism. Today we look at Islam.

Our scripture reading for today comes from the epistle to the Romans. I have always considered this letter a masterpiece. Penned in Corinth, it was written by the Apostle Paul in the spring of A.D. 57, while he was on his third missionary journey. His main theme is God's plan of salvation for the world, for both Jews and Gentiles. The topic in the fifth chapter is justification. We stand justified before God because of the redemptive work of Jesus on the cross. We live at peace with God because of Jesus's redemptive work on the cross. Living at peace with God is one of the great blessings of our faith, but it is absent in Islam. Christians stand justified before God. Muslims stand submissive to Allah. There is a world of difference. Our scripture reading for today is Romans 5:1-9.

**Romans 5:1-9** Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>2</sup> through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. <sup>3</sup> Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; <sup>4</sup> perseverance, character; and character, hope. <sup>5</sup> And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us. <sup>6</sup> You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. <sup>7</sup> Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. <sup>8</sup> But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. <sup>9</sup> Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!

The University of Al Azhar in Cairo, Egypt has been educating students for more than a thousand years. The education those students receive is exceptional. Every class is demanding. Even the entrance exam is demanding. There are 20,000 students at the University of Al Azhar. Each one of the incoming class of freshmen is required to recite the Koran. That ancient text is approximately the same size as our New Testament. It takes each student about three days to recite it. I think that is impressive. They see it as a sign of submission to Allah. The key word in Islam is *submission*. The key word in Christianity is *love*. If you can agree with that statement, say, "**Amen!**"

What do these eight people have in common?

Janet Jackson  
Shaquille O'Neal  
Dr. Oz  
Mike Tyson  
Ice Cube  
Muhammad Ali  
Cat Stevens  
Omar Sharif

This is the answer: Each one is or was a Muslim. They are not the only Jews in the world.

According to Pew Research group, there are 1.7 billion Muslims in the world. That is approximately 23% of the world's population. Behind Christianity, it is the second largest religion in the world. However, Islam is the fastest growing religion in the world. Islam is an Abrahamic monotheistic religion. Muslims believe they are the one true faith, revealed through the prophets, including Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus. The last and the greatest of the prophets was Mohammed. Islam is divided among two denominations, Sunni (90%) and Shia (10%). Islam is the dominant religion in the Middle East, North Africa, the Horn of Africa and Central Asia. The closest Muslim mosque to us is located at 542 Belmont Avenue, Youngstown; the Muhammad Mosque.

Before I continue I want to make the same confessions I have made in the past. I am uncomfortable with this section of my message for three reasons. First, I do not claim to be an expert on Islam. I am still struggling with Christianity. Second, Islam is complex to say the least. Third, it is challenging to look at Islam objectively. The present state of our world makes it impossible. However, I will do my best.

The Jews believe their faith began with God. He sought out Abram to create a new race. Not so with the Muslims. They believe their faith began through the efforts of a single man. That man's name was Mohammed. He was born in Mecca in the year 570. Orphaned at a young age, he was raised by his uncle. His family was both respectable and poor. Mohammed never learned to read or write, yet he was extremely intelligent.

Without a formal education, he learned about the ways of the world from the streets of Mecca. He learned about the business world from the local merchants and he learned about the world's religions from travels through that commercial giant. Most of the people who came to Mecca were tribal polytheists. In other words, they believed in more than one god. Only two small groups believed there was only one god, the Jews and the Christians. Mohammed was drawn to that monotheism. He too believed in the one true God. If you translate the name of the one true God into Mohammed's native language, it is *Allah*. Heavily influenced by both the Jews and the Christians, Mohammed both prayed and meditated.

According to the Muslims, one day Mohammed went into a cave overlooking Mecca to find solitude. They say that while he was in that cave, the angel Gabriel came to him. Just like in basic Christian theology, angels in Islam are not protectors. They are messengers. The angel handed Mohammed letters from God. Do you see the problem? Mohammed could not read or write. Imagine getting a letter from God that you could not read. They say, Gabriel solved that problem by placing the letters into Mohammed's chest. To be more exact, Gabriel placed those letters on Mohammed's heart. For the rest of his life, Mohammed would periodically sink into a deep trance and make divine proclamations. Those sacred proclamations became the *Koran*. That sacred text teaches them how to be completely submissive to Allah.

This is where his story grows dark. In time, Mohammad accepts an invitation to move to Medina. It is while he is in that place that he becomes a political force. His visions become more narrow and violent against other religions. At his first opportunity, he attacks Mecca itself. Once conquered, he attacks the tribal polytheists. He was never ashamed of that feat because he saw the violence as an act of submission to Allah. Mohammed died at the age of sixty-three years old. For the next 300 years his teachings spread throughout the Middle East and Northern Africa.

So what do the Muslims believe? The answer to that question comes from the Five Pillars of Islam. Here are the five:

- 1. The Testimony of Faith** With conviction, they are required to say in their own language, "There is no true deity but Allah, and Muhammad is the prophet of Allah." They consider this to be the most important pillar in Islam. They believe testifying pleases Allah.
- 2. Prayer** Muslims pray five times a day. They pray at dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset and at night. They always face Mecca and always touch the ground. They touch the ground to remind themselves to stay on the path and they touch the ground as an act of submission. They pray in order to please Allah.

- 3. Giving** Muslims believe everything belongs to Allah. They believe giving leads to spiritual growth and helps the poor. They believe giving pleases Allah.
- 4. Fasting the Month of Ramadan** The ninth month on the Islamic calendar is Ramadan. During that month, Muslims are required to fast from dawn to sunset, abstaining from food, drink and sexual relations. They believe fasting leads to spiritual growth and compassion for the poor. They believe fasting pleases Allah.
- 5. Pilgrimage to Makkah** Muslims believe everyone who is physically and financially able should make a pilgrimage to Makkah (the Arabic word for Mecca). Muslims believe the father of their race was Ishmael, the unwanted son of Abraham. Makkah is the place where God commanded Abraham and Ishmael to build. Muslims believe circling and praying around this sacred place pleases Allah.

They do each one of these five pillars for one reason. They are trying to be submissive to Allah. If you are a little confused, but understand everything in Islam is about submission, say, "**Amen!**"

The Islamic faith is heavy on the word 'submission' but light on the word 'love'. In my opinion, that is their spiritual flaw. In Christianity, we celebrate the fact that God loves us. In our scripture lesson for today, Paul says it clearly, God loves us. He sent Jesus into the world to die on the cross for our sins so we can stand before God justified. We are not perfect, yet we are forgiven. Verse eight is key. It says, "*But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*"

When I was in high school, I had a good friend by the name of Dave. He was one of the brightest people I have ever known. He went on to get his Ph.D. in some detailed part of engineering. I saw him several years ago. He now is married and lives in California. He has an impressive sounding job. Dave was bright, but Dave was also one of the worst drivers I have ever known.

I remember clearly the night he picked me up and greeted me with these words, "Stan is really mad at me. Our insurance man called today and said he is going to cancel our insurance if anyone in the family gets in one more accident." We both laughed. Stan was his father. We called him Stan behind his back. To his face, we called him Mr. Seagle. Before the night was over, the car was filled with teenage boys. We were somewhere in Howland, when the predictable happened. The road turned but Dave didn't. He hit a mailbox and drove into someone's front lawn. Everyone in the car laughed but Dave. He looked at me and said, "Russ, Stan is going to kill me." One of

the neighbors called the police and before long, each one of us took turns in the backseat of the cruiser telling our version of the truth. It was the police who called Stan. A few minutes later Stan arrived. Dave said it again, "Stan is going to kill me." I am happy to report that Stan did not kill Dave. However, he did take his son to the side to talk to him. We knew it was going to be fine when Stan put his arm around Dave's shoulder and walked with him to talk to the property owner. The next morning, Stan and Dave put up a new mailbox together. Then, they fixed the lawn together.

I have never forgotten that night. That experience changed Dave. He became a more careful driver. That experience changed me. Mr. Seagle impressed me. He was a loving father, who overlooked his son's flaws and stood by his child. I wanted to become that kind of father. However, there was more. Stan Seagle was also an excellent theologian. He illustrated for me just how much God loves us! I am thankful I serve a loving God and not just a god I am just trying to please. The Apostle Paul said it best, *"But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."* And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**