

Last week we talked about some of the difficult questions that every Christian has to wrestle with at some point: “Out of all the religions on earth, how do I know my religion is the correct one? Am I a Christian just because my parents were Christian, or because most of the people in my community or area are Christian? Is it just another expression of my culture, or is there something more to it?” When people ask me these questions, I usually point to two unique traits of Christianity—that it is the only religion with a firm historical foundation, and that it is a religion with a completely unique message. We considered Christianity’s firm historical foundation last week. Today let’s focus on Christianity’s unique gospel message. Listen to Luke 24:36–48:

LUKE 24:36–48. (EHV)

As [the apostles and other disciples] were talking about these things, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” But they were terrified and frightened and thought they were looking at a ghost. He said to them, “Why are you troubled? Why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself. Touch me and see, because a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While they still did not believe it (because of their joy), and while they were still wondering, he said to them, “Do you have anything here to eat?” They gave him a piece of broiled fish and some honeycomb. He took it and ate in front of them. He said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms.” Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures. He said to them, “This is what is written and so it must be: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.”

What is at the beating heart of all other religions on earth?

Islam has what are called “five pillars.” The first is the creed that there is no god but Allah and Muhammad is his prophet. That is the entirety of the creed. Each Muslim must recite this creed at least once in his or her lifetime. The second pillar is ritual prayer. Muslims are not only supposed to pray to Allah spontaneously, but also ritually, five times each day—sunrise, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset, and night. They must perform ritual washings before these prayers, must pray the prayers facing Mecca with certain prescribed motions, and the prayers must include recitations from the Arabic Qur’an. The third pillar is almsgiving. Muslims are required to give two and a half percent of their possessions to where the need is greatest, such as to the poor, debtors, or slaves. In one Muslim school of law, if anyone fails to do this and regards it as unnecessary, he or she may be put to death. The fourth pillar is fasting during the month of Ramadan. During that month, Muslims are to abstain from food, drink, music, entertainment, and intimate relations from sunrise to sunset every day. This year, the month of Ramadan actually ended this past Tuesday. The fifth pillar is pilgrimage to Mecca, which every Muslim who is physically and financially able is required to make. This pilgrimage must take place during the twelfth month of the Muslim lunar calendar, and it includes a series of complex rituals over a

period of ten days. Some Muslims also believe in a sixth pillar, jihad or holy war or holy struggle—the struggle to preserve Islam against non-Muslim beliefs. Some consider jihad to be a literal, even military, struggle, while others interpret it as a spiritual struggle. These are the pillars of the Muslim religion, all of which are considered to be methods of self-purification.

Buddhism has “Four Noble Truths.” One Buddhist author says that the more you understand these four truths, the better you can understand what Buddhism is all about. The first “noble truth” is the fact of suffering, which encompasses all dissatisfaction about things not being the way you want them to be. The second “noble truth” is the cause of suffering, which is desirous attachment to anything. The third “noble truth” is that suffering can completely end. So far, we might see a lot of overlap with Christian teaching, even though Buddhism and Christianity view suffering from a different perspective. But the fourth “noble truth” of Buddhism is the eightfold path to arrive at the end of suffering *yourself*—the right view, the right intention, the right speech, the right action, the right livelihood, the right effort, the right mindfulness, and the right concentration.

Although Mormons use a lot of the same language as Christianity—talking about grace, faith, repentance, and salvation—their use of these terms differs considerably from the way Christians use them. Ultimately, their religion also revolves around a person’s own works, as reflected in their so-called saving ordinances—baptism (which is considered a conditional, two-sided covenant agreement), confirmation, ordination to the Melchizedek Priesthood for men, temple endowment, and marriage. Their various degrees of salvation are all conditional on your participation in and faithfulness to these ordinances.

The list could go on. A common theme or thread runs through all non-Christian religions: They all focus ultimately on mankind and how they can better themselves or purify themselves and achieve a better state of existence on their own.

King Solomon pursued this avenue of thought for a time. You can read about a great many of his mankind-centered pursuits and meditations in the book of Ecclesiastes. But you don’t have to read farther than 1:2 to see what he concluded about all of them: They were all totally futile and empty because this side of heaven, apart from Christ, humans and their accomplishments are and will remain self-serving, imperfect, limited, and temporary.

But listen to how Christ sums up his religion: “This is what is written and so it must be: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations.” Jesus’s apostle Paul later proclaimed: “Let it be known to you that through this Jesus forgiveness of sins is being proclaimed to you, also forgiveness from everything from which you could not be justified through the law of Moses. In this Jesus, everyone who believes is justified” (Acts 13:38–39). Paul later wrote: “Indeed, it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” (Eph. 2:8–9). And on another occasion Paul wrote: “No one will be declared righteous in his sight by works of the law, for through the law we become aware of sin. But now, completely apart from the law, a righteousness from God has been made known. The Law and the Prophets [that is, the books of the Old Testament] testify to it. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all and over all who believe. For there is no difference, because all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 3:20–24). And we could

look at so many more words and passages spoken by Jesus and his apostles, not to mention the Old Testament.

The beating heart of Christianity is not us, not our works, merits, and efforts. The beating heart of Christianity is Jesus and his saving work on our behalf. Unlike our works, which are self-serving, imperfect, limited, and temporary, Jesus's work is other-serving, perfect, universal, and eternal, which also means that it doesn't leave our salvation in doubt. We can be completely certain of eternal life in heaven, because it depends on the perfect Son of God, not on us. That's why the Christian message is called the gospel, which means "good news." Its heart and core does not consist of prescriptions, rituals, or laws for you to perform; it consists of good news for you simply to believe. And when you believe it, what that good news proclaims is yours.

That doesn't mean that Christianity has nothing to say about good works and a pure life. It has a great deal to say about them. But good works are the fruit and indication of a good and correct faith, faith in the truth of full, free, unconditional forgiveness and salvation in Jesus Christ. Just like you know a well-planted, healthy apple tree will produce apples, so also those who believe in Jesus as their Savior will live a life in which they strive to do what is good in God's eyes and what will serve their fellow humans. But those good works are not a condition of our salvation or the way we earn or contribute to our salvation, which means they are actually done willingly, from the heart, and not out of fear or compulsion or for other selfish motives. Our salvation comes through Jesus Christ, and through him alone, as a free gift received through faith in him. The "what God has done for us" message of Christianity is completely unique among all the other "what you need to do for God" religions of the world, because it's the kind of religion that could only come from God, not from the mind or heart of any human.

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! And his resurrection is the proof that this unique religion of good news is, amazingly, the true one.