

# **Christianity - Christianity and the Religions of the World**

John 3:16

*“For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”*

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How Wide is the Mercy of God?

## The Character of the Judge

**This week we will read passages from the Bible, which capture the basic Christian message and the wideness of God's mercy.**

**Monday, February 5** – Let's begin our study of the basic gospel of Christ by reading one of the first recorded Christian sermons, preached by Peter on the day of Pentecost when God poured out the Holy Spirit on the disciples giving birth to the church. *Read Acts 2:22-47.* What does Peter say here about God? About Jesus? About our human condition? What did Peter instruct those who responded to his preaching to do? What does it mean to "repent"? If you are not sure, you might look it up in a dictionary. He also commands baptism – this is the outward and visible sign that one has entered into a covenant relationship with God – a sign that you have decided to follow Christ and that God has adopted you, forgiven you, and given you life. Have you been baptized? If you have never been baptized, but have committed your life to Christ, baptism is the next step. Please call the church office to find out more about baptism and how you can schedule a time to be baptized. Notice what the early Christians did after they gave their life to Christ – what does this correspond to in our church today? Are you doing these things?

**Tuesday, February 6** – Today we'll look at the life and ministry of Jesus. Take the time to read the following two chapters in one sitting – it will take about ten minutes. These chapters quickly recount a host of different things Jesus did – each of which is meant to point to his identity and to the nature and character of God. Ask this question as you read these two chapters: What do we learn about the heart and character of God through each of these stories? *Read Matthew chapters 8 and 9.* Allow these stories to shape your prayer – talk to the Lord about what you read.

**Wednesday, February 7** – *Read Luke 19:1-10.* What do we learn about Jesus from this passage? *Read John 8:1-11.* The latter of these stories was an independent story about Jesus that circulated distinct from John's gospel and was added to his gospel probably in the early second century. What do these two stories tell us about the heart of Jesus? What was Zacchaeus' response to Jesus' mercy? What did Jesus command the forgiven woman to do? What do you think Zacchaeus was like before he met Christ? After he met Christ? What was this woman like before and after her encounter with Jesus. How do these stories speak to your life?

**Thursday, February 8** – Let's take a look at the human condition as described in the New Testament, and God's action on our behalf in the light of this condition. *Read Romans 7:14-8:17.* What do the verses in chapter seven teach us about ourselves? Have you ever experienced this? Chapter eight is God's response to our dilemma. Notice not only what Jesus has done for us, but also how the Holy Spirit is such an important part of the Christian life. In your prayer thank God for the gift of life in Jesus, but also take time to invite the Holy Spirit to work in your life.

**Friday, February 9** – Today we turn to the first letter of John (not the gospel of John, but the first letter of John, found near the end of the New Testament). John was one of the eyewitnesses who had been with Jesus during his earthly ministry. *Read I John 1:1-2:11 and I John 4:7-12.* What do these passages teach us about God? About being Christ's followers? Allow this passage to guide your prayer today.

## **“Christianity”**

**Theme: “Christianity and Religions of the World**

Sermon preached by Jeff Huber – Based on a sermon series by Rev. Adam Hamilton

February 11, 2007 at First United Methodist Church - Durango

## **John 3:16**

*“For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”*

### **SLIDE 1 Christianity and World Religions**

Today we conclude our series of sermons on Christianity and religions of the world by focusing on our own faith of Christianity. Before we do that I would like to take a minute to remind you about why it we are doing this sermon series.

### **SLIDE 2 The first aim of this Sermon Series was to accomplish this church’s purpose and mission—to be Jesus Christ to the world.**

As I look at the person of Jesus it is clear to me to his heart goes out to those who are earnestly seeking and asking questions about faith. He is constantly having dinner with those who are outside of his faith tradition and he uses parables or everyday stories to try and help people get a grasp on who God is and how much God loves them.

Being culturally relevant is one of church’s core values and as I visit with people in our culture who do not regularly go to church they often have questions. Until they get answers to these questions they are not willing to make a commitment to a particular faith, and certainly not the Christian faith. They want to know, “Why there so many world religions?” Why do they share certain things in common and where are they different? How is it, if there is one God, there are a multitude of religions? Why doesn’t God just straighten everyone out?

One thing that bothers them in particular is the idea that they have heard from some Christians. The idea is that at the end, at the last judgment, even the most faithful of God seekers in other faiths will be condemned to hell. Only the Christians will get it right and have salvation.

They struggle with these ideas that they hear from Christians and they wonder where the justice is in that line of thinking. They see something like this, “If you’re God is like that than I am not really interested in following.”

Another thing they experience is a paralysis. With all of the different truth claims that are out there they struggle to choose any one of them. They don’t know much about any of the others so how can they choose to be a Christian when they don’t even know what the other ones are teaching. In large part, this series of sermons was aimed at answering

those kind of questions, and the giving of faithful portrayal of each of the other religions of the world so that in the end those persons might say, "Now that I have heard about the others I am ready to make a decision to follow Christ."

That was the first aim of this sermon series and that is why it we announced this series at the candlelight Christmas Eve services. We had over 100 new persons come and be with us on Christmas Eve, and we have had close to 100 new persons worship with us during this sermon series. Many of you have written me notes and e-mails the past few weeks saying that this is why you are in church right now and that this sermon series has been fascinating, and that we are answering your questions.

The second aim in preaching in this series of sermons was for those of you who are Christians. My hope is that we would grow in our own faith as we look at these other religions. My basic presupposition was this: if Christianity really is the truth as we say it is then it will not crumple when we study the other religions. Instead, our faith will be confirmed by study of other religions and will not be torn down by that study.

**Slide 3     The second aim was to confirm our own faith as Christians.**

This is what has happened for me each week as I have prepared these sermons. As I have studied Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Judaism I feel like I have grown as a Christian. I have seen my faith through the lands of someone else's faith and I've come to appreciate all the more what I believe is a follower of Jesus Christ. My hope is that this is what would happen for you and that you would say, "I did not expect this, but I grew to be a deeper follower of Christ as a result of hearing this series of sermons." Many of you have written me notes to say that this is exactly what has happened for you.

**SLIDE 4     The third aim was to equip you to interact with people of other faiths.**

Finally my aim was to equip you as Christians to be able to share your faith with people of other religions. My hope was to give you tools that would open up those conversations where you might be able to genuinely share your faith in Jesus Christ with integrity, humility and respect. We tried to model for you how you can listen and learn from other people and build bridges with them. I have tried to model that for you in part by showing you in video some of the conversations I have had with people of other religions

in our community, so that instead of just tearing down people of other faiths we look for ways to find common ground and then share the gospel across the bridges that we have built.

Many of the people that you have seen on the video screens from our community have actually worshipped with us or come to one of our small groups to interact with us. As they sat here in worship I wanted them to feel that we had presented their faith with great integrity and yet we still had the ability to talk about where we are different. My hope was to model those things for you so you might be effective witnesses of Jesus Christ.

This past week I heard an interview with one of the great Christian writers and thinkers of our time, Oz Guinness. In this interview he talked about how he has had the opportunity to interact with many leading journalists in the United States. He talked about one journalist who is an anchor person for one of the three major news networks, someone that you probably see on TV every week. Oz did not mention his name but said that several years ago he had flirted with the idea of becoming a Christian and he wanted to know more about the Christian faith.

Then he did a story on the news and there were a whole lot of Christians who got angry with him as the anchor person who presented the story. They sent him angry letters that called him names and threatened his family. He said that after hearing their responses and the approach they took to disagreeing with him he said, "If that is what Christianity is like, then I don't think I am interested."

I was reminded of Gandhi who we mentioned several weeks ago in the sermon on Hinduism, who was heavily influenced by Jesus Christ. The Sermon on the Mount was what moved Gandhi towards the nonviolent approach that he took in the revolution that took place in India. And he was quoted as saying this once.

**Slide 5      "I would have become a Christian but for the Christians that I have known."**

My hope is that this series of sermons would help you not be like one of those Christians that actually pushes people away from Christ. Instead my hope is that by your understanding, by your willingness to build bridges, by your gracefulness and your humility, you might be that kind of Christian who draws other people towards Christ—not repels them.

These were the aims of this series of sermons and you will have to

decide for yourself how good we were at accomplishing them. Today it we want to turn our attention to Christianity and for that I would like you to take out of your bulletin your sermon notes and your study guide. Even though the sermon notes say “Judaism” they really are for this sermon on Christianity. The title is just incorrect and we did not catch it until after they were all printed. I figured our congregation was bright enough to look over that mistake rather than use up more paper. The rest of the sermon notes are correct and they are an outline of today's message. The study guide on the reverse side also has typos in it because we forgot to change the days of the week. So just change that first one from February 5 to February 12 and then work your way through it this week so you can study your Bible and look a bit deeper at the sermon for this Sunday. Before we go any farther, let's take a moment to pray together.

While it seems like this sermon should be the easiest of the bunch for me as a Christian pastor, but I must say that it is a struggle to figure out everything you want to say about your faith in 25 minutes! When you've lived the Christian faith and you breathed it and it is your life it can be a challenge to pare all down into one sermon. I was thinking it would be fun to walk you through the entire life of Jesus, step by step today. Then after that it would be great to walk you through the history of the Christian faith and especially the major differences between a Roman Catholics and Orthodox and the Protestant expressions of the Christian faith. Then when we were done with that, which would have been about noon...you get the picture don't you? We will not be able to do all of that today and we actually will be doing a series of sermons on the denominations of Christianity next fall so you will have to wait until then for that.

Instead, today we are going to try to boil things down into the essential gospel. We are going to focus it down into what Christians believe the truth to be about God, about humanity, about salvation and about how we respond to God's salvation this is what it would be. I could think of no other place to start than this one passage of Scripture that many of us have memorized more than any other. Even those of you who don't normally go to church know this passage of Scripture because you have watched a football game and seen in the end zone John 3:16 held up. You then picked up your Gideon's Bible and you looked it up to see what it said. You know that it says this and today we are reading from the King James Version. Please read it with me.

## **SLIDE 6    John 3:16**

***“For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”***

This is the outline of the Christian faith and if you remember that verse then you can remember the basic plan of salvation and how God works in the world according to the Christian faith. Let's walk through this briefly.

## **SLIDE 7    The Essential Gospel - God's Love.**

First off this passage begins with God. God so loved the world. Christianity begins with the assertion that there is a God who created the cosmos, but it is more than just the belief in God. All of the other religions except Buddhism have this at their starting point, that there is a God. Christianity says that believing in God is the most irrelevant truth that any of us can hold onto because God's nature is love.

Hinduism, Islam and Judaism all believe in God, yet in Christianity we believe that God's primary characteristic is love and that because of that love God longs to be in a meaningful and personal relationship with us. 1 John 4:8 says, “God is love.” Other religions may believe that God has the characteristic of love also, but for Christians is the primary and driving characteristic of God. Not only is God love but this is why he created human beings, to be recipients of his love. God longs to have fellowship with us. We were not created to be slaves or servants, but to be objects of God's affection. This is what drives God.

In Islam, God's primary concern is that you understand the Qur'an and you live it. In Judaism the primary attribute of God is justice. In the Hinduism God is completely unknowable—he is Brahman—he is beyond all things and beyond knowing. God is impersonal and the force that is out there. But in Christianity God is personal and knowable and love.

That leads us to the truth claim of the Christian faith.

## **SLIDE 8    The Essential Gospel—The Human Condition and Its Consequences.**

We believe that human beings are created in the image of God. There is a lot of good in us and we have the capacity to transcend ourselves and to love other people, to be selfless and to sacrifice. But

there is something wrong with us to. Christianity teaches that as we look at the human condition and as we try to assess what we are like as human beings there is something not right. We call it sin. You can call it something else if you want to.

As I interviewed the leaders of the other faith traditions every one of them said that one of the key differences between our religion and Christianity is that we don't believe in original sin. So I would ask them how they look at humanity. Do you believe human beings are perfect? The answer was always no because human beings make all kinds of mistakes. Do you believe that human beings sin, or make mistakes? The answer was always yes. So when do we start sinning? Every one of them said that it happens when we are really small. I have to admit that it sounded to me like they all believed in original sin. Original sin says there is something inside of us that is broken and it tends towards doing things that are destructive to ourselves, to the environment, to the world, to other people and to God. This sin separates us from God.

When you started going to school as a small child you saw how this worked. You would pick on other kids and other kids would pick on you. Who taught you that? It just sort of happened didn't it? As you got a bit older and you were a teenager your parents would catch you right in the middle of doing something wrong and what did you do? You probably lied about it! Who taught you to do that? For many it is just a natural response to try and get out of being in trouble. I would love to meet the man and his congregation who has never had a lustful thought about someone that was not his wife. I would love to meet the couple in his congregation who was never had a good knock-down, drag-out fight because they were disagreeing about something. I would really like to meet the parent in this church who is never yelled at their child inappropriately. Show me any one in his congregation who is not felt the tinge of jealousy or selfishness or hatred or prejudice. This is our human condition and you need some explanation for it.

As Christians we look at this and we understand that we are broken inside as human beings. We even see this on a global scale. States and nations are made up of people who are broken. Why did Osama bin Ladin do the things that he did? Because he is broken inside just like the rest of us and never something that needed to be fixed. Why do people kill one another over matters of faith around the world? Why is it that we as the

most technologically advanced nation in the world, with all our intellect and great compassion as a country, we cannot figure out how to solve the world's problems without the use of force? It is because there is something broken in the human condition.

Christianity believes that this brokenness leads us towards perishing in this life. We believe that we will continually hurt ourselves and we will continually hurt other people, but we also by virtue of our sin create a wall that separates us from God. Ultimately we would be eternally separated from God and this is why the Scripture teaches that we are perishing and in many ways we are doomed if left up to our own choices.

### **SLIDE 9 The Essential Gospel—God's plan to deliver us.**

Because God loves us and God cares about us, and God knows that we are perishing and broken inside, God takes the initiative to try and fix the problem—to try and vaccinate us and help us be something more than what we are. God so loved the world that he took a course of action so we might not perish but have everlasting life. What was that course of action? This is God's plan of salvation. God has always wanted human beings not to follow our bent towards sin but instead to follow his path, so he sent a light.

First God calls Abraham to be a light to the nations, but people didn't notice in they did not follow. So God then sent the law through Moses which were 613 commandments that would get humans to give up their natural inclinations, but they didn't like following the law and quite honestly none of us do either. God then sent prophets to warn us but of course we kill the prophets and we failed to listen to God's Word through them.

So what will God do? What will guide do to heal us of our brokenness? What will guide do to show us what we were meant to be? What will he do to redeem us and save us from ourselves so that we will not perish but have everlasting life?

Here it was God's plan. ***"Perhaps if I became one of them—perhaps if I walked among them—maybe they would see and understand and they will be healed. Perhaps if I could experience what they have experienced—perhaps if I could help them in some way that I have not been able to help them before—then maybe. Maybe if I suffered for them they could see the costliness of their sin and perhaps they would be moved in their hearts not to pursue that***

***path anymore, but instead to pursue me. Maybe if I rose from the grave I conquer their fears and I could give them the assurance of truth and life. Maybe they would follow me then. Maybe they would know and they would live. Maybe if I put my Holy Spirit inside their hearts. Maybe if I gave them a church they could live and grow when and be with other people of faith. Maybe if I gave Scriptures that they can understand. Maybe all these things together might help them to walk the path I have laid before them—the path to life and not death."***

This is what Christians understand that God was doing in Jesus Christ. Now the Hindus have lots of stories about God taking the appearance of a human being and having conversations with other people. But that is not what Christians believe. Christians believe that God did not just take on the appearance of a human being.

We believe that God became a human being. We believe that the essence of God, God's deity, was placed or wrapped in human flesh. We believe that he was emptied of his divine power for a period of time and that instead Jesus Christ walked among us as a human being—that he was born the way that we are born, weak and helpless—that he grew up as a child and he knows what it's like to be a little kid and then to be a teenager. He knows what it's like to have his parents upset with him. He knows what it's like to be afraid as a child. When you pray to him as a teenager about all your jumbled up feelings and emotions he understands that because he experienced it.

He knew what it was like to become an adult—to have friends, to be betrayed by friends, to be disappointed and to be hurt by those that you love. He knew what it was like to do the right thing and then have terrible things happen to you in response. He knew what it was to be afraid to die and so he prayed the night before his death, "Father if it is possible, take this cup from me."

He knew what it was like to be tortured and to experience pain. He understood what it was to feel as if he had been forsaken by God when he cried out on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

And he experienced death. God in Jesus Christ experienced our humanity. He not only experienced our humanity he tried to help us understand his divinity. Jesus is meant to paint for us picture of who God is and what God's character and nature is like. He was meant to paint a

picture of the love of God for us, and the extent to which God would go to save us. In his suffering on the cross he was meant to paint a picture for us of the costliness of our sin. It is a message to us that someone will suffer for the things that you have done.

God said, "It can be you or it can be me. Let me suffer. And if you understand the price I paid, perhaps then you will follow me."

Finally, in Jesus Christ, God was doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves in resolving some of our unresolved conflict. The Buddha was right in that one of the great struggles we have as human beings is the fact that we all will get sick, we will get old, and we will die. That is like a black cloud that looms over our heads if we let it.

But as Christians we believe that God chose to do something about that too. On the third day, at about the time everybody was convinced that Jesus was good and dead, just as he is promised he rose from the grave. He said, "Because I live you shall live also. I give you this resurrection as a proof that there is something beyond this life and you don't have to be afraid anymore. You need to grieve not as those who have no hope, but as those who have an eternal hope and who knows what lays ahead for you." This is what God was doing in Jesus Christ.

In Jesus Christ God was also offering us the gift of salvation, that we might be cleansed and forgiven and give an eternal life. How do we lay hold of that salvation?

You learned in the sermons that we have heard over the past few weeks how other faith traditions say that we claim salvation. In Buddhism you are saved by meditation. You are saved by thousands of life times, coming over and over and over again, and meditating to the point where you no longer have any cleaning or desire for this life. Finally, after you've let go of this life's desire, you are liberated and your unique self and spirit is no more.

In the Hinduism you need to build up a lot of good karma and get rid of the bad karma. This also takes hundreds of thousands of life times. You come back over and over again and you're going to try to do enough good things to cancel out the bad things so that in the next life you can come back a little further along the path. Finally, after you have worked hard over centuries or perhaps millennia you have built up enough good karma and there is no more bad karma and you are released.

In Islam, if you follow the law of the Qur'an closely enough and observe the five pillars in a perfect way then you are saved. In Judaism, if you follow the 613 laws closely enough, or you do enough good things to atone for all the bad things in your life, there is salvation in life forever with God.

But in Christianity this is all turned completely on its head. In Jesus' death on the cross, God did everything necessary for your salvation already. He has already offered you a gift. He will forgive you and cleanse you of all your unrighteousness. He will place his spirit in your heart and promise to be with you. You will be his people and he will be your God. He promises that you will live forever with him in the kingdom of heaven. He offers you this as a gift, something that is priceless, and you can't pay for it. You can't do anything to earn it because God has already paid the price for you. All you can do is accept it. All you can do is receive that gift with gratitude in your heart.

### **SLIDE 10 Our Response to God's Gift.**

This is a very different way of being saved. This is why the gospel writer John said, ***“For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”***

You simply trust and believe in him, and then you live your life in response, not trying to earn God's salvation but simply living up to the calling that you have received—living into the grace that has already been given to you.

Imagine a time when someone has given you a priceless gift. Someone has given you something astounding that you could not even fathom that they would give to you. Your first response is to tell them that you can't receive it because it costs too much. But they say, “No, I have given you this gift as a gift of my love to you. Don't turn it down. Don't reject it. Don't turn down my gift.”

Then you say, “At least let me give you something for it.” It is really a priceless gift, but to pull out a \$20 bill and try to force it into their hand. That is what your good deeds look like to God after what he has done to you. Your good deeds are not earning your salvation. Your salvation was a gift from God.

When someone has given you a precious gift, do you know how you

live after that? How do you live towards them from that time forward? Don't you just want to love them? Doesn't the costliness of the gift motivate your heart to want to reach out to them?

That is exactly the Christian idea of salvation by grace, and how we live our lives in response to that gift. This is the essential gospel.

From that I want to sum up for you why I am a Christian. I'm going to give you six quick and short points. I have listed all of them in your sermon notes because they might serve as an outline for how you might share your faith experience with other people if these also are true for you.

### **SLIDE 11 Why I Am a Christian—The Witness of the Apostles.**

My first reason is that I believe in the accounts of the eyewitnesses who knew Jesus. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, and the book of Acts, and almost all of the Epistles, were all written by people who were eyewitnesses or who knew the eyewitnesses who were with Jesus for his earthly ministry. When I read those eyewitnesses and what they say about Jesus, and the way they describe him and the things that happened in the ways that they live their lives in response to the Christ event and those three years with Jesus, I find their witnesses compelling and I believe them.

No matter what religion you believe you are choosing to believe in someone's account of what is true. You are choosing to believe the eyewitnesses or those who heard about the event from an eyewitness. When I take into account what we know about where the Gospels and the New Testament came from, and when I read these accounts of who Jesus was and what his ministry was about, I believe them.

### **SLIDE 12 Why I Am a Christian—The Christian Ethic and Life.**

I find the Christian ethic the most authentically human and most compelling lifestyle that is offered among any of the other major religions that I've studied. Following Christ calls us to a different kind of lifestyle. It calls us to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. It calls us to love our enemies. It calls us to bless those who wound us. It calls us to live sacrificially and it calls us to be concerned about people that most other nations and tribes in the history of humanity have not been concerned about.

Yes, there are times when Christians have done terrible things throughout history. But when I look at history as a whole, most of the major

movements to free people from oppression, or to heal and reach out and compassion for people that were not your own responsibility, nearly always the vast majority of people who were working to bring about deliverance and justice to those that were not their own were followers of Jesus. Behind the liberation and South Africa, behind the civil rights movement in our own country, behind the movement for freedom in the former Soviet Union, behind the movement to feed and clothe and house people in need here in La Plata County you will find Christians and evolved and leading the way. Most of the ministries in the United States founded to care for people whether it be hospitals or schools or soup kitchens or shelters were started by Christians. Our Peace Corps was organized by United Methodist missionaries.

Why?—because Christians heard the call of Christ to sacrifice themselves for other people. That is not to say that folks in other religions don't do good things, but you will find that over the last 2000 years a vast majority of good things that were done were rooted in people who have a faith in Jesus Christ.

This very week 200 years ago is a great example. Churches throughout the world will be singing the song “Amazing Grace” this week because it was 200 years ago on February 23 that the slave trade was abolished the English Parliament. Behind that movement was William Wilberforce and James Newton and John Wesley. Wilberforce was the parliamentarian who fought almost single-handedly to abolish the slave trade. James Newton was a former slave trader who also was a slave at one point who penned the words to “Amazing Grace.” John Wesley was the founder of Methodism. There is a motion picture that comes out in two weeks about their story, but we were able to get a sneak preview and I like to share that with you today as we wrap up what it means to be a Christian. The video clip is a bit long but I think is well worth it.

**VIDEO     Amazing Grace**

**SLIDE 11   Repeat**

We will be getting together a group of us to go and see this movie in a few weeks when it is released in our theaters here in Durango. As you can see from these short clips it will be a powerful testimony to the power of faith in Christ and how it can change a person and a nation.

**SLIDE 13   Why I Am a Christian—Jesus' Picture of God**

I am a Christian because the picture of God painted by Jesus is the most compelling picture of God offered by any of the major religions. When Jesus looks on the multitude of people and he has compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd, I find that a compelling picture of God.

When Jesus chastises the religious hypocrites and then turns to a woman who was caught in the very act of adultery, and then turns to the woman and says, "Where are your accusers? I forgive you. Go and sin no more." I find that a very compelling picture of God.

When Jesus devotes most of his time to hanging out with people who were considered sinners and tax collectors, I find that to be a compelling picture of God.

When Jesus stands at the edge of the Sea of Galilee, on the edge of the boat, and calm as the wind and the waves, I find that to be a compelling picture of God. When he gets off the boat and finds a man that is a raving lunatic infested with demons and no one can heal him, and Jesus turns and cast out the demons and the man who was crazy is now saying again, I find that to be a compelling picture of God.

One blind Bartimaeus is crying out, "Jesus please help me!" Jesus allows him to see once more and I find this a compelling picture of God.

When Jesus on the night before his death meals at the feet of his disciples and washes their feet like a slave would wash them, I find that to be a compelling picture of God.

When Jesus suffers on the cross with a crown of thorns around his brow, I find that to be a compelling picture of God.

When Jesus rose from the grave, I find that to be a compelling picture of God.

#### **SLIDE 14 Why I Am a Christian—The Redemptive Power of Christ's Death**

I am a Christian because of the redemptive power of the cross. As a teenage kid I had done so many things that were not right and to feel his forgiveness and his grace in my life, and to know how that changed me. Jesus has the power to save the unsavable. He has the ability to transform our lives and in a way that no one else can. Jesus offers for us and does for us we cannot do for ourselves, and I find that to be a compelling reason to

be a Christian—that he can actually save us by what he has done for us.

### **SLIDE 15 Why I Am a Christian—The Christian Hope**

I am a Christian because of the hope we have in Jesus Christ—the hope in his resurrection and the life. I find hope when I can around my arms around one of our congregation members who has lost to child and I can assure them they now rest with God and that one day you will be with him again. When I think of my own mortality of the loss of my family members or friends, I am grateful for the truth that is in Jesus Christ, that death has been swallowed up in victory and we have hope for what comes next. I'm a Christian because the hope we have in him.

### **SLIDE 16 Why I Am a Christian—The Christian Experience**

Finally, I am a Christian because I have felt his presence in my life. The best moments of my life, the times where I have felt the most complete and utter peace (which don't happen all the time), have not been in Disney World or hanging out at a bar with my best buddies. I experienced those things when I'm in prayer with my family, when I am in worship, when I am connected to God there is a peace that passes all understanding.

Those times where I've experienced the greatest joy and fulfillment were those moments where I was serving Christ with my life. The times when I was standing on top of a Habitat for Humanity house putting on a roof, or working with a group of high school kids to insulate someone's home, or spooning out the latest delicacy as soup kitchen.

Everything in my life is made richer by my experience with him. My marriage and my family and my vocation are all deeper and more meaningful because my faith in Christ and my experience of his presence in my life.

This is why I would want you to be his followers as well. This is why I preach the Gospel week after week. This is why we do sermon series like this one, so those of you who are asking questions about faith might find the answers in the living Christ.

If he were here today and you're not a Christian then please know this. You might not even be aware of it but you are missing out on the best part of life without Christ. Your marriage is missing out on something. Your family is missing out on something. Your career is missing out on

something. Your life is missing out on something that it takes to be authentically human. You are missing out on the best part of the human experience without Jesus Christ in your life.

### **SLIDE 17 Conclusion: The Last Judgment and an Invitation**

All of that brings me to the conclusion of this sermon. I began this series of sermons with a sermon that upsets some of you. I was trying to answer the questions of those who were not religious or who are skeptical of the church—they are disturbed by what they see as Christianity's judgmental attitude towards people of other faiths. They will tell me, "Pastor Jeff, I just can't conceive how you Christians would say that someone who is faithfully following God in another religion (we're not talking about those who have rejected faith) would say that all of them are condemned. Is that what you Christians are saying? I just can't fathom that."

I have to be honest and say that I cannot fathom that either. That upset some of you. But when I look at the nature and character of God whose focus is his love for those that many of us would consider outside of the religious world, who looks at us as his children, who was willing to pay such a price in order to redeem and save us, I have a hard time fathoming that God is simply going to turn his back on them. I have a hard time fathoming the fact that God can't apply the merits of what Jesus did to those who were seeking him but didn't know to call upon the name of Jesus.

There is a wonderful story in the Gospels that Jesus tells about how the kingdom of God is like a party. God sends invitations to a variety of people. Some of them say they are too busy and cannot come. Some of them say they are not interested in the party and it's clear what happens to those folks. God is not a force anyone to go to heaven. God will not make you go to his party. The day will come for those where I think they will catch a glimpse of what could have been and they will realize with great sorrow that they did not claim that. God wanted them to have it that they didn't want, or they were too busy for it.

But what about those people who never got the invitation? Or what if they got an invitation that was in a language they could not understand? Or what if the person who delivers the invitation is rude or mean? What about them?

All of us will stand before Jesus one day I believe. Every one of you will stand before Jesus one day, and what will he say to you? And what will you say to him?

I tried to envision what Jesus will say to those who long to know him, who wanted to come to the party but didn't know when it was or how to get there, and so they tried to follow the best they could. I try to think about this from the perspective of other people sometimes. You see I am absolutely persuaded that Christianity is the truth. But let's think about this from the perspective of a Muslim. What if on the last day I found out that I was wrong? I would have to count on God's mercy being so wide that he would look at me and say, "Jeff I understood that all that time you were seeking me and loving me in the best way to you could."

I would also remember that Jesus, the one we will be standing before on judgment day, is the one who was accused of hanging out with sinners and tax collectors and those who weren't "in" with the religious establishment of his day. He was the one who forgave sins. He was the one who from the Cross said this when he looked down upon the people who had nailed him there, "Father forgive them for they don't understand what they do."

I actually am not concerned whether you believe what I believe about that or not. I'm a little disappointed that sometimes people say that they don't think I'm a Christian because I believe that the grace of Jesus Christ is bigger than I can fathom. Mostly what I have to share with you is that the gospel message is not about you or I being the judge, but it is about sharing what God's grace has done in our lives to change as shape us into his image.

Most of you who were sitting here know about the party. You have gotten the invitation and you know that he loves you. You know that there is something wrong inside of you at times and you know the price he was willing to pay for you to be saved.

## **SLIDE 18 Christianity and World Religions**

The question I ask you today is simple: What will you do about that? Some of you have been walking the fence so long—are you willing to get off the fence and finally say, “Now that I have studied the other faiths, now that I understand something of the Mercy of God, I would like to follow Jesus?” His invitation is given to you. He offers you a great gift of salvation. What

will you say to it?

I want to invite you to bow your heads and close your eyes. I am going to give you an invitation to actually allow Jesus Christ to be your Lord and Savior. You don't have to come forward, but I'm going to invite you to express this in one simple way. Nobody else is looking and with your eyes closed and your heads bowed, if you would like to say, ***"I want to follow Jesus Christ. Jesus I need your forgiveness and grace and I accept what you don't cross and accept it as my savior. I want to be at the party and our live with you forever. I want to be one of yours."***

If you want to say that today whether you already are Christian and you want to reaffirm it or today for the first time you want to accept Christ I just want you to raise your hand. Nobody else is looking to me so just raise your hand if you want to say, ***"I want to be a follower of Jesus. I want to be one of his."***

Keep your hand raised and I want to encourage you to join me in a prayer. I'm going to say it out loud and you can just say that your breath if you are ready to accept or reaffirm Christ as your savior. You can do it very simply with these words.

*Thank you God for sending Jesus Christ. Thank you for your love and your grace. Thank you for the way he suffered for me. I accept the gift of your salvation. Help me to follow you, in Jesus name. Amen.*