

Sermon for Sunday, March 4, 1979, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor  
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"REMODELED OR REMADE"  
II Corinthians 5:16-21

Text: "Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come." II Corinthians 5:17

Some time ago I was listening to a panel of ministers on the radio and they were discussing the various religions of the world. The men represented various religious backgrounds, including a rabbi representing the Jewish faith. A caller suggested that with the various major religions of the world, each adherents, that what you believe isn't too important as long as you are sincere in what you believe. "After all," he said, "aren't we all trying to get to the same place?"

This morning I'd like to give my own answer to that caller. Many people today, including some well-intentioned Christians, tend to agree with the position of the caller. If his position is the right one, we Christians need to back off our evangelistic zeal and our efforts to send missionaries to convert the world. If one religion is as good as another, we need to understand that and develop a lot more tolerance. On the other hand, if it isn't true, we need to understand why it isn't so and what our position ought to be.

Implicit in the caller's statement are three basic questions. I'd like to deal with each of them in turn. The first implication is that sincerity is what really counts. Do you agree that it doesn't matter what you believe as long as you are sincere? Let's put it to the test. Recently I read in the paper where a nurse working in the nursery of a large hospital mistakenly put carbolic acid in the eyes of a newborn baby instead of silver nitrate. Her intentions were the best. She was a kindly person who meant to do the right thing. But did her sincerity keep that baby from going blind?

Is truth ever determined by sincerity or majority vote. Suppose we all vote to suspend the law of gravity this morning and we unanimously agree on it. Would any of us then climb up on the church tower and jump off? If we did, we wouldn't suspend the law of gravity, we would just illustrate it.

Or again, we Christians affirm that Jesus was the son of God, that his death was in our behalf, and that God raised him from the dead. The Islamic faith and Judaism both reject this. Now, either they are wrong or we are wrong. There is no way for both of us to be right. No matter how sincere we all are, somebody is wrong and truth cannot be determined by sincerity. As a matter of fact, truth is truth no matter what we believe. Truth doesn't cease to be truth because nobody believes it and untruth doesn't cease to be untruth even though everybody believes it. So, truth isn't determined by majority vote or by sincerity. One religion is not as good as another. If one is true then the others are false. And it doesn't matter how many people believe them to be true, or how sincere they are in their belief, that doesn't make the false become true.

The second question raised by the caller was this: aren't we all trying to get to the same place? Well, are we? In Hinduism the ultimate goal is what they call Nirvana. Nirvana is the reunion of the human personality with the all-pervading force in the universe that they call Brahm. They liken this to the rejoining of a drop of water with the ocean. The individual is simply lost in reunion with what they call God. Now, some of you may want that, but frankly, that's not where I'm trying to go.

Or look at Buddhism. Its ultimate goal is also called nirvana, but they mean something different from the Hindu. Nirvana for them means the loss of all desire. Everything--all pain, all suffering, all hurt--come from desire. And if by pursuing a certain way of life called the Eightfold Path to Enlightenment, one can do away with all desire, then one achieves nirvana which means total nothingness. Like blowing out a candle, human life and personality are simply extinguished. Well, that's not what I had in mind either.

The goal of the Muslim in the Islamic faith is to achieve a heaven that is basically wine, women, and song. Ironically enough, this life style is achieved by not doing those very things here on earth! And while at first glance, I'll have to admit this concept has some appeal, when you get down to it, I can't imagine a heaven that consists totally of sensual indulgence. As a matter of fact, the God of Islam is capricious and unreliable and he is the author of evil as well as good.

In Judaism we come the closest to the Christian faith. Yet, the Jews do not accept that God is the kind of a loving, forgiving God who sent Jesus to die for the sins of the world. So, when the question is asked, aren't we all trying to get to the same place to be with the same God, the answer is no. No, we do not have the same concept of God and no, we do not have the same goal in the end. For the Christian, his goal is to be restored completely as a human being, with all of his defects and sins done away. His goal is to be re-united with God in perfect fellowship, and not only with God, but with all of those who love God.

The third question that was implicit in the statement of the caller is this: don't all religions teach about the same thing? Isn't it true that the purpose of religion is to help all of us be better people and to live more moral lives? For example, back when I was in college I took a course entitled "Religions of the World". I wonder how many of you have taken such a course. If you did, you discovered as I did that the so-called Golden Rule is a part of every great religion. From many years before the birth of Jesus, we have the Golden Rule in very similar form that we should do to others as we want them to do to us.

But it is precisely at this point that the Christian religion is different and unique from every other religion. You see, the Golden Rule is not the essence of the Christian faith. And as far as that goes, neither is the Sermon on the Mount. The fact is, if ethical behaviour is the essence of religion, Jesus didn't help us, he made things worse! Jesus made ethical rules harder than they had ever been because he lifted them to a higher level. You see, he talked about turning the other cheek, going two miles, loving our enemies, and telling us that if we even thought evil things that was as bad as doing them. Remember? "If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off; if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away." And those are hard, ethical sayings. They are impossible demands. So if the essence of religion is doing good, Jesus just made it harder for all of us.

But the Christian faith is uniquely different from all other religions because the heart of our faith is not the golden rule, not ethical conduct. Now, it is for other religions. Following the law is at the heart of Judaism. Following the so-called Five Pillars of Islam is at the heart of the moslem's faith. For the Buddhist, he tries to follow the Eightfold Path to Enlightenment so that he abolishes his desire. For the Hindu, he goes through a continuous cycle of birth, life, death, and rebirth as he tires to move up the scale in his reincarnation by being better and better in each succeeding life.

So, for all these religions it is a "do-it-yourself" proposition. If you try harder and harder to be better and better, maybe you will eventually please God

and the good will outweigh the bad so that you can reach whatever it is you are trying to achieve.

But that isn't true for the Christian. You see, Christianity is unique in its estimate of man. The New Testament has no illusions about you and me. In describing himself, St. Paul described all of us. He said, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." He said, "I can will what is right, but I cannot do it." He said, "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." (Romans 6:13ff) That describes me pretty well. Does it describe you, too?

So, if salvation depends on my doing good, like St. Paul, I'm lost. Yes, the New Testament understands fallen human nature, for even when we want to do good--when we want to follow the Golden Rule--we just can't do it. So, the New Testament is not only unique in its estimate of fallen human nature, it is also unique in its understanding of how salvation is obtained. Christians believe they are saved because Jesus died for their sins and when they accept it, God forgives them. In other religions men believe they achieve salvation by trying harder to be better until the good may outweigh the bad. But for the Christian, ethics and behaviour is not at the heart of his religion. No, the guts of the Christian faith is Jesus on the cross, paying for our sins.

Does this mean that the Golden Rule and ethical behaviour isn't important to the Christian? Well, not at all. They are very important to him. But there are two ways in which his ethics are different from any other religion. First, he tries to live by the laws Jesus laid down not to be saved, but because he is already saved. Because he is saved and he loves Jesus and wants to live for him, he tries hard to live a good life. But second, in trying to live by the Golden Rule and the Sermon on the Mount, he isn't on his own. No, when he accepts Jesus as his saviour and is forgiven, God makes a promise to him. God promises he will put his Spirit in the Christian's heart to help him live by that Golden Rule.

I don't know about you, but I needed that! I don't follow God's laws very well at all on my own. As Paul said, I keep on doing the things I don't want to do. So God puts his Spirit in my heart and when I let God's Spirit control my life, I am a better human being. Actually, I don't do all that well even with God's Spirit. The reason is because I don't live a Spirit-controlled life. I don't always let God's Spirit control my life. Do you have that problem, too? Yet, the fact is, I don't follow the law in order to be saved, but because I am saved. I follow the law because I love Jesus and because his Spirit in my heart helps me. That doesn't mean I'm perfect, but what it does mean is I am forgiven. And like the prayer of an old sinner, I can say with him, "Lord, I ain't what I oughta' be and I ain't what I'm gonna' be, but I thank you, Lord, I ain't what I usedta' be."

The great religions of the world are in the remodeling business. People are busy at work trying to renovate and remodel their lives, trying harder and harder to be better and better. Is Christianity unique? Yes it is. It is unique because it is not in the remodeling business. Jesus was a carpenter, but he never was in the remodeling business. No, he is in the remaking business. He is in the business of helping people be born again.

Does the Christian religion have anything special to offer you this morning--anything unique and different? Yes, it offers you Jesus. He offers you forgiveness and the assurance of your salvation. No other religion offers you such assurance. In Hinduism, Buddhism, Islamism, Judaism--all of them--you never have the assurance that you've been good enough long enough to reach your goal. But Jesus offers you forgiveness and you know you have eternal life. You see, Jesus doesn't want to remodel you. He wants to take you, just as you are, and remake you. As St. Paul put it in our text for today, "Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come." Jesus wants to remake you this morning, whoever you are. Will you come, just as you are, and let him do it?