

Sermon for Sunday, March 11, 1979, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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"ARE JESUS BELIEVERS BIGOTS?"

Acts 4:1-12

Text: "And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under
heaven given among men by which we must be saved." Acts 4:12

Some time ago I was talking to a friend who is a member of a non-Christian religion. We were discussing religious beliefs and he made a remark that has stuck with me. He said, "The trouble with you Christians is that you believe if a person doesn't accept your Jesus he is going to hell. Don't you think that is rather presumptuous of you? Besides, you act like you are better than anyone else." Well, I have thought about that a lot. Are we Christians really bigots? Are we intolerant of those who do not believe as we do? Do we act as though we were better than anyone else?

The first point I want to make this morning is this: In the New Testament Jesus makes certain claims about himself. It is Jesus who says, "No man comes to the Father, but by me." (St. John 14:6) And when Jesus asks his disciples, "who do you say that I am?" he is obviously telling them he is the Messiah promised in the Old Testament. When you come to the rest of the New Testament from the Book of Acts right through to the last verse of the Book of Revelation, it is asserted over and over again that Jesus is the Son of God, that he is the promised Messiah, and as our text for this morning puts it, "there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

So, the claims about Jesus are not something Christians made up. They are claims made by Jesus himself and they are claims made by his disciples and the writers of the New Testament.

This puts the Christian in an awkward position if it makes him a bigot to believe the New Testament. But turn the whole question around. If a non-Christian wants the Christian to be more tolerant towards other faiths, look what he is asking the Christian to do.

First, he is asking him to call Jesus a liar. He is asking the Christian to admit that Jesus is not the only way, that Jesus is not the Messiah, that Jesus is not the Son of God, that He did not die for the sins of men. When I suggested to my non-Christian friend that this was the case, he replied, "Well, I accept Jesus as a great ethical teacher and a fine example of what a man ought to be." He went on to say that he thought the world could learn a lot about social justice and compassion from the ethics of Jesus. But I couldn't buy that. Not for a minute. "But if Jesus is a liar about himself," I said, "how in the world could we trust anything else he said? How can we follow the ethics of a man who lied to us about the most important thing about himself?"

So, the first thing a non-Christian does is ask the Christian to call Jesus a liar. But the second thing he is saying is this: objective truth doesn't matter. In religion what is important is not objective reality, but what counts is subjective. That is, if you really believe something subjectively--in your heart--that is what counts. Now, if that is really true, how does it work out? For example, take what happened to the followers of Jones in Guyana. Subjectively they believe something about Jones, about life, about who and what they were. That's why that incredible, fanatical loyalty to their leader. Did that make it truth? If we believe that truth is subjective then we have no basis on which to criticize them.

But somehow, I can't find it in my heart to believe the objective reality doesn't matter. Wrong belief, no matter how sincerely held, is still wrong. And right belief, no matter how strongly rejected, is still right, is still true.

So, for the man who wants the Christian to call Jesus a liar and wants him to accept subjective belief as the measure of what is true, he is asking an awful lot. And if he calls a Christian a bigot for refusing to do that, he is asking for more than any conscientious person can do.

Then, the third thing he is asking the Christian to do is this: he is asking him to say that the important thing in religion is ethics--or human behaviour. Now, if ethics is what religion is about, then my friend was right. In some cases one religion is about as good as another if we are talking about ethics. Now, not entirely--some ethics of some religions are bad ethics. For example, in Hinduism, they believe that how a man comes back into his present life is determined by how he acted in his previous life. If he acted badly, then he comes back in some lower level of poverty or even a lower form of life. Therefore, to help that man if he is poor is to interfere with God's judgment. To eradicate poverty and hunger is to go against God's punishment for previous misdeeds. That's why some countries have been so backward and why there is so much poverty and disease. So some religions have better ethics than others. As a matter of fact, the Christian religion has the highest ethics of any religion in the world. If you are looking for the best ethical system ever invented, go to the New Testament.

But the fact is, the New Testament is not a book of ethics. It has ethics--the best in the world--but that is not its principal subject. No, the New Testament is basically about Jesus. Who he is--what he did--what it means. So, to make the Christian religion a matter of ethics is to miss the whole point. You see, the world doesn't need a new ethical system, even if it is better. The world has got more ethics now than it knows what to do with. We have better ethics now than we have behaviour. I wouldn't walk across the street to give a man a new, improved ethical system--he knows more good now than he is capable of doing. But I would cross the street, I would walk the city, I would go around the world to tell a man that Jesus has died for his sins and he is forgiven...to fill a man there is a fountain filled with blood drawn from Emmanuel's veins; and sinners plunged beneath that flood lose all their guilty stains.

If a person says a Christian is a bigot for insisting that Jesus is the only way, that person is asking the Christian to call Jesus a liar, he is asking him to say that objective truth doesn't matter, he is asking him to say that what religion is really about is ethics and human behaviour. Is a man a bigot if he refuses to do that? Or maybe it is the other way around. Maybe the real bigot is the man who would ask another to prostitute himself mentally and spiritually.

Now, having said all that, let me go on to say something else. Christians can be bigots in their attitudes. Bill Cosby has a very funny record in which he tells the story of Noah and the Ark. He imagines Noah's neighbor coming out one morning to go to work and finds the Ark in his driveway. In the ensuing conversation, Noah says to his neighbor, "I know something you don't know. Ha, ha, ha. How long can you swim?" Are we Christians ever guilty of that sort of an attitude? Do we ever take the attitude, "I'm better than you are. I'm going to heaven and you are going to hell. Ha, ha, ha." If we take that attitude, maybe we are bigots.

Let me say two things about that. First, no Christian has the right for pride. There is no merit on our part. God loves the whole world and Jesus died for all men. We are like one beggar telling another beggar where he can find bread. We are sinners saved by grace. Second, since Jesus died for all, it ought to break

our hearts that there are those who don't know about Jesus. It ought to wound us to the depths of our spirits that there are men and women who don't know Jesus as their personal saviour. We ought to be out beating the bushes to bring people to church, to share with our friends and associates that Jesus died for them. No, the Christian can never take a superior attitude because of his faith. He knows he is a poor sinner, saved by grace, and he knows that God's desire is for all men to come to Jesus.

That day my friend said to me, "Do you mean to tell me that you think all of the millions of people in the world who don't know about Jesus or who don't believe in Jesus are going to hell?" Well, that's a hard question to answer. I have to hold two things in tension. First, I have to believe that Jesus meant what he said about being God's way of salvation. But second, I have to believe that a loving God who sent his own son to die for men is a fair and loving God as well as a just God. It is inconceivable that God would be less fair, less just than I, with all my frailties would be. I know God will deal justly and fairly with all men and he will judge them on what light they did have and not on what they didn't have. That's what the Bible teaches (See Romans 2:1-16). So we Christians have to keep those two things in tension--that a man is truly saved through Jesus only and God calls us to go into the whole world to share that Good News with men. Yet, we have a just and fair and loving God who will deal fairly with all men. You see, my problem is I don't want justice. Do you? I want mercy!

There was one last thing I said to my friend that day. "Friend," I said to him, "you are looking for the Messiah to come. You are expecting the promises of the Old Testament to be fulfilled and God will send the Messiah. When he comes, what will he have on Jesus?"

Probably most of you saw the stage play or the movie, "Fiddler on the Roof." When the Russian Jews are being forced to flee from their homes, one of them says to the Rabbi, "Rabbi, wouldn't this be a good time for Messiah to come?" The rabbi replies "Well, we will just keep on waiting somewhere else. In the meantime, let's start packing". Oh, what a sad, sad note. Oh, what a longing, what a hunger, what a need in human heart--looking for Messiah to come when he is already here.

Let me close this morning by leaving some questions with you for you to answer for yourself. Do you believe Jesus is who he says he is? Do you believe his death on the cross was done for you? Do you believe the Bible when it says that there is no other name under heaven given among men by which you may be saved? Do you believe that?

If Jesus isn't who he said and if the Bible tells us a lie, then forget it. Go about your business and do whatever your own heart and mind tell you to do. Go about the business of living your life the way you really want to live it.

But if you do believe it--if Jesus is who he says he is--if there is salvation in no one else--will you accept him as your Saviour; will you give your heart, your life, to him? And will you do it now? You see, if Jesus is really true, wouldn't it be foolish not to?