

"The Way, the Truth, the Life"

John 14:1-12

May 14, 2017

"I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through Me."

What a thing to say -- and what a time to say it. It is the Last Supper, and the cross is near at hand. Jesus predicts His betrayal, and Judas disappears into the darkness. Peter declares that he will never abandon the Savior; Jesus replies that Peter will deny Him three times before the night is over. Betrayal. Denial. Death. Things are going to come crashing down soon.

And if Jesus is put to death, where will the disciples go? These are men who care enough about spiritual matters to abandon all and follow Him; but if He is dead, what is left? They could turn to the Pharisees, who preach salvation by way of behavior-that you can be saved by keeping their rules. But Jesus Himself called them "whitewashed tombs:" They look very good and pious on the outside, but inside they are dead in hypocrisy and sin. There's no salvation there. They could check out the Greeks; in the tradition of Aristotle and Plato, the Greeks still place a high regard on knowledge and truth, and they've done so much with philosophy and their study of man, why he is the way he is, and how the world should be. But despite all the knowledge, the world still isn't the utopia they long for. No salvation there, either. Then again, there are tons of heathen religions around, pointing to their oracles as ways that people can get in touch with a god and achieve real life; but everyone's experience is so different that none of it really makes sense in the end. And, in the end, there is no hope.

If Jesus is put to death, what will the disciples do? There is nowhere else to turn-no way, no truth, no life. And it is here that Jesus declares, despite His impending death, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through Me."

Jesus' death is not the end for the disciples-it is, in fact, the fulfillment of Scripture. By His death, He will win for them forgiveness, life and salvation. By His death, resurrection and ascension, He is going to prepare a place for them. As the firstfruits of the resurrection, He is securing their way to heaven. This is not the end; this is, in fact, their redemption.

So, the Savior declares, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through Me." Where the disciples are otherwise left only with despair, Jesus responds with precious Good News. All is not lost: Despite all the evil of the world, and all that is about to happen, there is still a way, truth and life: Jesus Himself.

I. The Ways of the World

While much has happened in the last 20 centuries, much remains the same. When it comes to religion, the world apart from Christ offers you three different, basic options.

One option is to turn religion into moralism: This means that religion is all about what you do. Good people go to heaven; bad people don't. Therefore, religion is not about faith, but about the will: You will be saved as long as you can summon the moral strength to do good things. What are those good things? It varies from group to group. In some churches on the fringe of Christianity, you will be saved as long as you keep the Ten Commandments. In Islam, a very moralistic religion, you will be saved as long as you follow a strict code of prayer and behavior. If you are an animal rights activist, then vegetarianism is the good work.

All sorts of religions are made up of moralism: The way to heaven is by doing good. People who follow such religions can never live up to the perfection that their religion demands. Therefore, they are haunted by hypocrisy which, when made known, exposes their religion as a fraud. Furthermore, those who follow a strict code of behavior tend to grow proud of their behavior; they will therefore look down on those who do not attain their high expectations. This can turn into cruelty. Consider the Pharisees, who-rather than attempt to win over the apostles-sought their death instead. Consider Isis, or the Taliban of Afghanistan, carrying out executions and amputations on those who refused their code of behavior. The one who believes in salvation by works grows proud of his works; and that pride may well lead to cruelty: verbal, if not physical.

But there is a greater problem: There is no salvation here. Man can never live up to God's requirements for perfection and holiness. Salvation is by grace through faith, not of works, lest any man should boast.

Still, many preach moralism today, that the way to heaven is by good works, by an act of your will. But this is no way at all. You simply can't do it.

Not all believe that religion is the way of moralism; others believe that the discovery of God and truth comes through speculation. Religion, then, is not about an act of the will; it is an act of the mind. It is finding truth by study, by knowledge, by philosophy.

There are plenty of examples of such religion in history: Consider the great Marcus Aurelius, who lived about 150 years after Jesus. Considered one of the greatest Roman emperors, he was regarded as the embodiment of reason. His laws were built upon the "universal brotherhood of man," and he brought a new mercy and humanity to the Roman Empire. Or consider the Enlightenment in France, with the idea that of equality among all. Many have put forth brilliant systems of knowledge about how the world does operate, and how the world ought to operate. Many highly intelligent philosophers have thus defined truth.

But there are problems with salvation by speculation, too. As philosophers have risen and fallen throughout the centuries, they've often contradicted one another. Not all of them could be true, and all had elements that were false. Furthermore, salvation by knowledge usually rules out what can't be known; therefore, most religions based on knowledge alone rule out the idea of God, for He can't be scientifically measured.

However, the consequences grow in severity: Human beings and human minds are infinite and sinful; their knowledge is, too. Marcus Aurelius, that great Roman emperor who preached the "universal brotherhood of man," heard of a religious group called "Christians" who prophesied judgment for sin; in response, he persecuted them. The Enlightenment in France, which led the French Revolution, also led to the guillotine and the unjust death of thousands; unjust, but perfectly sensible to the philosophy of the time. We might also add that the famous philosophy of equality by Karl Marx, communism, has led to the death of millions.

Scripture declares that knowledge puffs up (I Cor. 8:1) and that it will vanish (I Cor. 13:8). Many preach that religion is the pursuit of truth, and that truth will be found by human knowledge. But the sinful human mind cannot achieve salvation. There is no truth there, and so there is no hope.

The world offers one other form of religion, Mysticism. Rather than works of the will or knowledge of the mind, one can find God and true life by encountering God through personal, emotional experience. By experiencing God through the emotions, one can become one with God, know Him, and partake in His life. Some practice mysticism by self-denial, by depriving themselves of the things of this world in order to focus on the things of God, in the hope of encountering Him there. Others, including Eastern religions like Hinduism and New Age cults, seek to find Him through extensive meditation. Some look for God in dreams, claiming to have met with Him in visions. Still others seek to find God through altering their minds with substances or exhausting actions that supposedly set emotions free.

The problems with mysticism, with finding God in the emotions, are many. Emotions rise and fall; therefore, one's understanding of God is constantly changing. This should clue us in to the second problem: The god that is found there is only as big as one's emotions; it is a god that is created on one's own terms. It's an imaginary god, nothing more. Still, many religions are founded on mysticism today, seeking God and life through the emotions and mystical encounters with God.

So, there you go-the ways of the world. There are really only three varieties of religion that the world teaches apart from Christ. Moralism, which says you must use your will to do good works; that is the way to heaven. Speculation, that says you must use your mind to gain knowledge of truth; that is the way to salvation. And mysticism, which says you must rely on your emotions to make contact with the Divine and the life He has for you.

All three strains of religion have a couple of things in common. First, all of them declare that religion is about your work, not God's. Whether you are seeking God by the works of your will, the works of your mind or the works of your emotions, it is all up to you.

Therefore, they have a second thing in common: All condemn the Gospel. The Gospel declares it is not about your work at all. But that's an idea that the world rejects. Furthermore, since the world trumpets all sorts of works, all sorts of philosophies and all sorts of experiences, it must condemn the Gospel of salvation through Christ alone as far too narrow-minded and exclusive. How can He be the only Savior?

This leads us to the third thing in common: All of these religions fail. They are all based upon human effort, and they all end up in death-nothing better. No matter how much the world tries, it cannot find a way to God. No matter how hard the world thinks, it cannot establish new truth. No matter how sincerely the world feels, it cannot find life with God. All these roads lead to death. All of these end in despair.

II. The Good News of the Way

Despair would be the order of the day for this world, except for this wonderful news that our Lord declares in the Gospel lesson today: "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through Me." Despite the sin and evil of the world, there is a Way. There is Truth to be found. There is Life-eternal. He is Jesus.

Moralism says, "Live a life that where your good works meet the requirements, and you'll be saved." The problem is that we can't meet God's holy requirements, so our work is no way at all. But there is a way: Jesus has fulfilled all the requirements of God's Law for us. You see, part of His redemptive work was the living of a perfect life as He made His way to the cross. And having lived a perfect life, He gives the credit to us. God declares, according to His Law, "You cannot live up to My commandments-you cannot save yourself by your works, by the act of your will. No way." Jesus continues, "I am the Way." He lives a righteous life, and He gives us the credit for it-even as He takes our sin upon Himself and hauls it to the cross.

Speculation says, "As long as you use your mind and seek out God in knowledge, you'll be fine." But our minds are finite and sinful, and cannot comprehend God and His ways. There is one, though, with perfect knowledge: Jesus Christ. His knowledge is perfect because, as the Son of God and coequal with the great I AM, He knows all things. His knowledge is also perfect because, as the holy Son of God, His mind is not tainted with sin. Therefore, when He speaks from His perfect knowledge, what He says is always certain. His promises are always sure: He always speaks the truth. God declares, according to His Law, "You cannot find me in your knowledge, for I use even the foolish things of this world to confound the wise. You will never know the truth from your own thoughts, and you can never be certain from your own speculations." But Jesus says, "I am the Truth." The truth announces that you are lost in your trespasses and sins, and cannot save yourself. But He has died and risen

again to guarantee your redemption. And if He says it, it is true. His promise of forgiveness is sure.

Mysticism looks to bridge the gap between man and God, to "become one with Him," if you will, to spiritually connect with God. That is how you achieve life. But in our mystical attempts to bridge the gap, all we can do is create a god as big as our imagination, nothing more. Jesus has bridged that gap in a very real and physical way: The Son of God has become flesh and dwelt among us. He has done so in order to die in our place. He has done so that He might raise us up, body and soul, to stand before God in heaven. To those who wish to know God, He declares that to know the Son is to know the Father. To those who seek a spiritual connection with the Almighty, Jesus gives them a real, concrete presence: For He is really present in His Word and Sacraments, to give His people forgiveness-to give them life! The Lord declares, according to His Law, "You cannot find me in your emotions and experiences; you can never be sure of My plans from such things. You cannot be certain that you have life." Jesus continues, "I am the Life." Christ, the Life of all the living, declares that He has taken on human flesh to die your death, to give you His life. It is He who brings you into communion with God, for to know the Son is to know the Father.

So the world declares: "Your will will show you the way, your mind can teach you the truth, and your emotions can bring you to life." But all attempts of the world fail. Jesus declares, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through Me."

The world attacks. "Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life? The only Way, Truth and Life? How exclusionary. How sectarian. How separatist, and insensitive to others." Perhaps we don't help matters all that much in the way we use this passage; too often, upon hearing the false teaching that there are other paths to heaven, we are quick to say, "No! John 14:6 declares that no one comes to the Father except through Jesus." This is true, but to use this passage as a club is to miss out on the Good News. At the Last Supper, Jesus did not say this to warn the disciples of false religions. With His death looming, He spoke these words to give hope: In the midst of a world cut off from God, there is a way, and it is Him.

This is the Way we proclaim-that Jesus has gone the way of the cross, died for the sins of the world, and risen again. Because He is risen, we declare the truth: The price has been paid for sin. Death is conquered. He will raise us to everlasting life. A heavenly mansion is prepared. It is all accomplished by Jesus, the Way and the Truth; and as the Way and the Truth joins you to Himself, He also gives you Life.

We rejoice this day in this wonderful news. In a world coming apart from sin, there is still redemption. "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life," Jesus says. No one comes to the Father except through Me." He is the Way, the Truth and the Life for you; for you are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen

(With sincere thanks to Dr. Gene Edward Veith's discussion in "The Spirituality of the Cross," pp. 17-29)