

Text: Ezekiel 36:25-27

Theme: Many Religions, Only One Salvation

Date: May 18, 2008 (Trinity Sunday)

In the name of Jesus, dear Christian friends.

How many religions are there? One way of answering that question may be to look at the Yellow Pages of the phone book and count how many different churches are listed. I did that this week. Do you know how many churches are listed in our Fond du Lac Yellow Pages? 78! Seventy eight different churches ranging from Lutheran to Roman Catholic, Reformed, Greek Orthodox, Presbyterian, Episcopalian, Methodist, Baptist, and United Church of Christ. Then there are the many different non-Christian churches or cults, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Seventh Day Adventists and Christian Science. There are also those groups which claim they are not religious, but really they are, such as the Salvation Army, the Boy Scouts and Girls Scouts of America and the various Lodges.

With such a listing of churches some one might be inclined to ask, "How can anybody know which is the right religion?"

Some might claim that it's being a little narrow-minded to reject many of these religions as false. Shouldn't we raise our children with an open mind and let them choose which religion they want when they grow up? Shouldn't an intelligent person shop around a little bit and worship in many different churches, so he or she can gain a better perspective on his or her own faith? While there is some spiritual wisdom with this kind religious comparison, the best test for determining the true religion is inspired by the one true God. Through the prophet Ezekiel, God is telling us about the one true religion. This part of God's Word is very useful for many people because it helps determine which religion is true and which ones are false. **While there are many religions in the world today, there is only one salvation.** When determining whether a religion is true or false, God's Word teaches us to ask three questions: 1) What does it teach about forgiveness? 2) What does it teach about faith? And 3) what does it teach about good works, the fruits of faith?

1. What about forgiveness?

There once was a man in the Bible who asked the most important question anyone ever asked. He was the jailer at Philippi, and his question was: "*What must I do to be saved?*" The jailer was facing the prospect of death, and he was afraid of what might happen to him after he died. His conscience told him that he was a sinner, and he wanted to be saved from his sins. Yet, the very way that he asked his question showed that he didn't have any idea of how a sinner is saved. He said, "*What must I do?*" Like every false religion in the world, the jailer thought that being saved depended on something he did. He knew that he was responsible for his sins. And so he figured, as the sinful nature does so well, that if he was responsible for his sins, then he must also be responsible for his salvation.

This false idea is the teaching that characterizes every false religion in the world. It's a false religion that everyone of us was born with, and to a certain extent, it sticks with us for as long as we live. It's been there ever since the devil convinced Adam and Eve that their happiness depended on something they did, rather than trusting in what God had already done. Samson, Saul, and Solomon all fell from power and grace when they began to trust in their own power instead of the grace of God. Peter made his most disgraceful fall right after he made his most boastful promise, "*I will never fall away.*" The belief that we can do it ourselves is the religion of man. It's the religion of the world. It's the religion of the devil. And it's the religion that ultimately leads to hell.

In our text we are given a way of testing a church to see if it contains this false religion. We must first of all ask the question: "*What does a religion teach about forgiveness?*" Most churches are agreed that man needs forgiveness. There is little difference among conservative Christian bodies in this regard and so many times people make the mistake of comparing churches by their teaching of the Ten Commandments. Almost all of them are agreed that it is wrong to hurt your neighbor, wrong to be selfish and greedy, wrong to curse God, wrong to steal and kill and commit adultery. The Roman Catholic, Reformed and Lutheran Churches are remarkably the same in the preaching of the Law. But just because churches are agreed that abortion and disobedience are sins does not mean that they are agreed on the way to heaven. It does not mean that they teach what God teaches about forgiveness.

The question, "What must I do to be saved?" is not answered by the Ten Commandments. It is answered by the Gospel. In our text, Ezekiel speaks for God and tells us the only way that sinners are saved: **I WILL SPRINKLE WATER ON YOU, AND YOU WILL BE CLEAN; I WILL CLEANSE YOU FROM ALL YOUR IMPURITIES AND FROM ALL YOUR IDOLS.** When someone asks the question, "*How am I saved?*" there is only one answer, God's answer. God forgives you and you are saved. There is nothing that we can do to be saved. As much as we believe that we participate in our salvation or help God get us to heaven, that's how much we have embraced the religion of man and the devil.

Jesus Christ paid for the sins of all people. He died for all. *“He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.”* No priest, no human being can pay for our sins by offering up sacrifices. No man or woman, no matter how good they are, can ever do enough good works to earn forgiveness. And even trying to do so will get people sent to hell. Paul wrote to the Galatians, *“All who rely on observing the law are under a curse.”* How are we saved? How are we forgiven? May we thank God for the message of the Bible, *“Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved.”*

2. What about faith?

A second way to test churches is to ask what they teach about faith. There are many churches which teach that the sinner is saved only by faith in God’s forgiveness through Jesus Christ. But then they revert right back to the religion of man and the devil when they are asked, *“How does a person come to faith?”*

Many religions will claim that my faith is my decision and I can take responsibility for it. Such an answer to the question, *“How do I come to faith?”* reveals the trap of the devil. Man’s pride is so consistent that he is constantly trying to butt his way into God’s plan of salvation. But God’s plan included more than sending his Son to win our forgiveness. On this Sunday after Pentecost we are reminded that God’s Son went to heaven so that the third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, could be sent to us. The Holy Spirit’s work is every bit as important as the work of the Father and the Son. The work of the Holy Spirit is to bring sinners to faith in Jesus Christ. No one can come to faith by themselves. Every person is born with a sinful nature which rebels against God and refuses to accept the forgiveness that Jesus won. The Bible says: *“Every inclination of man’s heart is evil from childhood . . . The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing . . . The mind of sinful man is death, because the sinful mind is hostile to God . . . You did not choose me, but I chose you.”* That is why Martin Luther wrote in our Catechism: *“I believe that I cannot by my own thinking or choosing believe in Jesus Christ my Lord nor come to him.”*

There are only two possible answers to the question, “How do I come to faith?” Either I come to faith by myself, or God the Holy Spirit brings me to faith. St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, *“No man can say Jesus is Lord but by the Holy Spirit.”* In the words of our text, Ezekiel also says that there is only one way we can come to faith: **I WILL GIVE YOU A NEW HEART AND PUT A NEW SPIRIT IN YOU; I WILL REMOVE FROM YOU YOUR HEART OF STONE AND GIVE YOU A HEART OF FLESH.** God not only forgives our sins. It is by his power alone, not our own, that we come to believe in Jesus. This simple clear teaching of Scripture is denied by everyone who denies the power of the Holy Spirit to work faith in a baby’s baptism. It is denied by everyone who denies the gift of faith in the Lord’s Supper. May we ever thank the Lord of heaven, that *“It is by grace you have been saved through faith, and not by yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, so that no one can boast.”*

3. What about good works, the fruits of faith?

There is only one question left for the testing of religions. The question is: *“Who does good works?”* Either we are responsible ourselves for what we do, or God alone is responsible for all good in us. Those are the two possible answers to the question. Can we doubt the answer to this third question in view of the way the Bible answers the first two? The same Jesus who forgives us also said, *“Without me you can do nothing.”* St. Paul wrote to the Ephesians, *“We are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works.”* And to the Philippians, *“It is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good pleasure.”* And so Ezekiel also says that God alone is responsible for every good thing we do: **I WILL PUT MY SPIRIT IN YOU AND MOVE YOU TO FOLLOW MY DECREES AND BE CAREFUL TO KEEP MY LAWS.**

In spite of the fact that there are many different religions throughout the world, there still remains only one salvation. May the Holy Spirit grant us this grace that we always ask these three important questions, not only of the different churches and preachers in the world, but also of ourselves:

Where does my forgiveness come from?

Where does my faith come from?

Where do all my good works come from?

May the Holy Spirit lead us all to believe with our whole heart that everything, absolutely everything, is a gift of God’s grace. And may he leads us to show our thanks by sharing his gift with others for as long as we live. Amen.