

# I AM!

The Fifth Sunday of Easter

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Grace, peace and mercy from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.

***"I am the Way, and I am the Truth and I am the Life. No one comes to the Father except through Me"*** (John 14:6)

What a thing to say, and what timing. It's during the Last Supper, and the cross is nearly at hand. Jesus predicts His betrayal, and Judas disappears into the darkness. Peter declares that he will never abandon the Lord; Jesus replies that Peter will deny Him three times before this night is over. Betrayal. Death and Denial, things are falling apart fast for these men of God

If Jesus is put to death, where will the disciples go? They abandoned all to follow Jesus; but if He's dead, what then? They could turn to the Pharisees, who preach salvation by following a moral code-touting one can be saved by keeping their rules. But Jesus Himself called them "whitewashed tombs:" Pretty on the outside, but inside they were dead in hypocrisy and sin. There's no salvation there. They could follow the Greeks; by heeding the tradition of Aristotle and Plato. The Greeks had a high regard for knowledge and truth, and they did much with philosophy and their own study of man. Why we are the way we are, and how the world should be. But despite all that knowledge, the world still isn't that perfect. No salvation there. Then again, there are tons of heathen religions, pointing to their oracles as the way that people can get in touch with a god and achieve enlightened life; but everyone's experience is so different that none of it really makes sense. And, in the end, there's no hope there either.

If Jesus is put to death, what will the disciples do? There is nowhere else to turn-no way, no truth, and no life. And it's right 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 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 first-fruits of the resurrection, He is securing their way to heaven. This is not the end; this is 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. 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 WAY 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 basic options.

First is the religion of 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 man's works: You will be saved as long as you can summon the moral fortitude to do good things. What are those good things? It varies from group to group. Some say 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. The good works are different, but all sorts of religions are made up of Moralism: The way to heaven is by doing good.

The problem of Moralism is countless, and can even be identified without the use of Scripture. People who follow such religions can never live up to the perfection that's demanded. They are

haunted by the 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 look down on those who do not agree or live differently. This can turn into cruelty. Consider the Pharisees, who rather than attempt to persuade the apostles instead sought their death. Consider the Taliban of Afghanistan, carrying out executions and amputations on those who refused their code of behavior. But this also includes social or political or activist groups like PETA or Earth First just to name a couple. The one who believes in salvation by works grows proud of their works; and that pride often leads to cruelty: verbal, if not physical.

There's a greater problem: There's no salvation. Man can never live up to God's requirements for perfection and holiness. ***Salvation is by grace through faith, that not of yourselves, not of works, lest any man should boast*** (Ephesians 2:8-9).

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 not do it.

Not all believe that religion is the way of Moralism; others believe that the discovery of God and truth come 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 religions 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 amongst all. Many have put forth brilliant systems of knowledge about how the world operates, and how the world ought to operate. Many highly intelligent philosophers have thus defined truth.

But there are problems with salvation by speculation. As philosophers have risen and fallen throughout the centuries, they've often contradicted each other. Not all of them can be true, and all had elements that were false. Furthermore, salvation by knowledge usually rules out what can not be known; therefore, most religions based on knowledge alone rule out the idea of God, for He can't be scientifically measured. In our generation we have Stephen Hawking who falls into that category.

Human beings and human minds are finite and sinful; and so is their knowledge. Marcus Aurelius, that great Roman emperor who promoted the "universal brotherhood of man," heard of a religious group called "Christians" who proclaimed judgment for sin; so in response, he persecuted them. The Enlightenment in France led to the French Revolution, which also led to the guillotine and the unjust death of thousands; unjust, but perfectly logical in light of that philosophy. We might also add that the infamous philosophy of equality by Karl Marx, communism, which led to the death of millions.

Scripture declares that knowledge puffs up (I Corinthians 8:1) and that it will vanish (I Corinthians 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. In man there is no truth, and no hope.

The world offers one other form of religion, Mysticism. Rather than works of the will or the knowledge of the mind, one can find God and true life by encountering God through a personal, emotional experience. By experiencing God through the emotions, one can become one with God. Some practice mysticism by self-denial, by depriving themselves of the things of this world in order to focus on the things of God. 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 some 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 numerous. Emotions rise and fall; therefore, one's understanding of God can constantly be changing. The second problem: The god that is found there is only as big as one's emotions; it's a god 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's the way to heaven. Speculation, that says you must use your mind to gain knowledge of truth; that's 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; that's the way to salvation.

All three strains of religion have a couple of things in common. First, all of them declare that religion is about you – what you do, and not what God did. 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.

The second thing in common: They all condemn the Gospel. The Gospel declares it is not about your work, an idea which 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 way, 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 in death - offering 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 abound today, except for this wonderful news that our Lord shares in the Gospel lesson: ***"I am the Way, I am the Truth and I am 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 of good works, meet the requirements, and you'll be saved." But we can not, God requires perfection. But Jesus is the Way: Jesus has fulfilled all the requirements of God's Law for you. You see, part of His redemptive work was the living the perfect life you could not. And having lived a perfect life, He gives you the credit. God declares, according to His Law, "You cannot live up to My commandments-you cannot save yourself by your works, No way!" But Jesus continues, ***"I am the Way."*** He lives a righteous life, and He gives you the credit as He takes your sin upon Himself and pays for it on 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 will and ways. But there's one with perfect knowledge: Jesus Christ. His knowledge is perfect because He is God, the great I AM, He knows all things. His knowledge is perfect because, as the holy Son of God, His mind is not tainted with sin. Therefore, when He speaks from His perfect knowledge, He says what is 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 continues, "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 to guarantee your redemption. And if He says it, it is so. His promise of forgiveness is sure and true.

Mysticism looks to bridge the gap between man and God, to "become one with Him," to spiritually connect with God. But in our mystical attempts to bridge the gap, all we can do is create a god of our imaginations. 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 your place. He has done so that He might raise you 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 and life! The Lord declares, according to His Law, "You cannot find me in your emotions and experiences; you cannot be certain that you have life." Jesus continues, "I am the Life." Jesus, 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 can show you the way, your mind can teach you the truth, and your emotions can bring you to life." But all these fail. Jesus declares, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through Me."

The world rebuts. "Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life? The only Way, Truth and Life? How exclusionary. How sectarian. How separatistic. How insensitive to others". Perhaps we don't help matters by 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." That's 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's Jesus (✝).

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 in full for sin. Death is conquered. He will raise us to everlasting life. A heavenly mansion is prepared. It's all accomplished by Jesus, the Way, the Truth; and the Life. He joins you to Himself, He 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 but through Me.** He is the Way, the Truth and the Life for you; for through Him all your sins are forgiven in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. For Jesus sake and in Jesus name, Amen and amen!

*The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, AMEN.*