

LESSONS IN LIVING

*Around the World in Forty Days: A loving
look at world religions from a Christian perspective
Part VII: What a Christian Can Learn From Islam*

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
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Scripture Reading: Luke 18:18-23 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

The scripture you just heard was an example of a type of teaching that was very common in the Jewish world. You're a working person, you don't have a lot of time for fancy theological talks - so you go up to the rabbi and you'd say, can you put your teachings in a nutshell? Can you give me your teachings *while I'm standing on one foot*, is the way they would say that. What you just heard was Jesus doing that same thing with Christianity. A rich young ruler says, "what do I have to do to be saved?" It's an exaggeration, it doesn't mean you have to sell everything, but that's what *this* person needed to hear. He thought he was perfect, but the whole idea of perfecting oneself is missing the point that we're trying to make it a better world. So this is that same teaching style that we will find now in Islam. A hadith is not from the Koran, but it is a commentary on the Koran, and is considered sacred in many parts of Islam. Khaled ibn al-Walid (I'm sure he wouldn't recognize how I said that if we met) . . .Khaled narrated the following lesson:

A Bedouin came one day to the prophet and said to him, "O messenger of Allah, I've come to ask you a few questions about the affairs of this life and the hereafter.

Q: How can I be the richest of human beings?

A: Be contented and you will be the richest of human beings.

Q: How can I be the most righteous of human beings?

A: Desire for others what you desire for yourself and you will be the most righteous of human beings.

Q: How can I be the best of human beings?

A: Do good to others and you will be the best of human beings.

Q: How can I get Allah to bestow mercy on me?

A: If you have mercy on yourself and others, Allah will grant you mercy.

Q: How can I be safe from Allah's anger on the day of judgment?

A: Do not lose your temper with any of your fellow creatures, and you'll be safe from the anger of Allah on the day of judgment.

Q: How can I get Allah to provide me with a protective covering on the day of judgment?

A: Do not uncover your fellow creature's faults and Allah will provide you with a covering of perfection on the day of judgment.

This ends our reading of scripture for the morning.

We're in the middle of our tour around the world, seeing what a Christian can learn from the different religions, and I think stopping at Islam is very, very important for us. When I was a child, I was taught that there were people out to get me, and they were called Communists. They were supposedly under

every bush, and every problem in the world was coming from these enemies who were, for some reason - I didn't understand - trying to get to Dallas and hurt me. Then in the second half of my life, when that story got too ridiculous for anybody to believe, my leaders gave me a new set of enemies called Islamic terrorists. Now they're the ones under the bush, and it is because of them that I'm supposed to be afraid, and they are now the reason why I'm supposed to mindlessly follow what my leaders say.

As Christians, we have a duty not to inherit somebody else's enemies. Do you understand what I'm saying? As a Christian, you have, and I have, a duty not to take up our nation's enemies without looking and seeing for ourselves. That's not saying that sometimes there aren't people who do attack, and that there are never times when we need to defend ourselves, but what sense does it make to say we're following the one who told us to love our enemies when we won't even listen to them?

Let's take a little poll. How many read Al Jazeera this morning before you came in? (no hands) You've probably never been on Al Jazeera. You've probably never downloaded anything from Al Jazeera, even though it expresses what life looks like in the view of the people that our leaders say are our enemies. It seems to me if our savior tells us to *love* our enemies, then at the very least we should *listen* to them. But that voice (Al Jazeera) is silenced in the same way that your enemies are always silenced. Again, I realize there are real dangers in the world, I realize there are real criminals and that sometimes they try to hurt people, but every nation tells its people to hate someone else. Every nation tells its followers to go out and hurt somebody else. Every religion, sadly, tells us that we have enemies, and worse, that they are just pitiful people we're supposed to save. To follow the one that tells us to love our enemies, we have to begin by listening. *Love begins when we listen.*

And so, today we're going to listen to a scripture that comes from a different religion. That's really helpful if you believe that God is bigger than you are. Now if God is a Presbyterian – (what, did I hear some snickering?) – as we know God *is*, then we wouldn't have to study anyone else. We could just look pitifully on the rest of the world as we waited their time to be carried down to hell by the demons. But God is bigger, is smarter and nicer than we are...I hope. Well then, we have some learning to do.

I want to look at three ideas most people have about Islam and challenge us on that. One is that Islam is more violent than we, the second is that there's a kind of brainwashing that takes place, and the third that there's intolerance, a sense that their God is the only God. Now to do such an examination we have to be honest and say that there are problems in Islam. There are problems in Islam, there are problems in Christianity, and there are problems in Judaism. And the problems are no more profound in one of those major religions than in the others. I will attempt to show that.

The idea of *jihad* has been used and misused in Islam. But for many teachers of Islam, the central jihad is the struggle inside your own soul for goodness, for justice, for mercy. We link the words terrorism and Islam in a way that is very, very dishonest. Does anyone look at the Klan that way when they burn a cross on somebody's yard as a threat? No, we do not apply the same logic. They (the KKK) do that because of their religion, [yet] nobody talks about their actions being radical Christianity. Nobody sees that as an expression of the Christian religion, and links those two together. We see those acts as a contemptible violation, a psychosis. But with our neighbors – and realize we're talking about one-fifth or one-quarter of the globe when we put all Islamic people in one bucket, it's a different logic.

If we were to be objective and have a standard where we weren't able to trick ourselves, we might ask, "which of the two religions has invaded the other the most?" Which nation – where these religions are predominant - crosses the other's boundary the most? Wouldn't that be an interesting test? We don't do that, do we? What if we said we're going to *define* the word "terrorism"? We're going to stop using it as an undefined term and we're going to specifically name these despicable weapons. Now why do you think our leaders don't do that? Why do you think terrorism is never defined? Is it possibly because we

use the same weapons, or at least have the same weapons - and in some cases, sold those weapons to the people who used them? Maybe if we were consistent in our definitions, we might have some self-reflecting to do.

I want to do a game show now. It's called, Who's' More Violent? I'm going to read three scriptures, three world scriptures, and you have to decide whether you think this is coming from an Islamic text or from the Bible. That would be a fair way to test, wouldn't it? We all want to be honest and fair, right? OK, game time. Breathe, breathe . . .

When you go out to battle against your enemies, and God delivers them into your hands, and you take them captive, and you see among them (the captives) a beautiful woman, and have desire for her, and would take her as a wife for yourself, then you shall bring her home to your house and she shall shave her head and trim her nails.

Which beautiful scripture [do you think this is]? That is Deuteronomy 21. Whoops!

Now, therefore, kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman who has known man intimately, but all the girls who have not known man intimately, spare for yourselves.

Are you sensing a theme here? That's from Numbers 31.

One more:

If your brother, your mother's son, or your son or your daughter, or the wife you cherish, or your friend who is as your own soul, entices you secretly, saying let us go and serve other gods, you shall not yield to him or listen to him, and your eye shall not pity him, nor shall you spare or conceal him, but you shall surely kill him. Your hand shall be the first against him, to put him to death, and afterwards the hand of the people.

That beautiful verse comes from Deuteronomy 13.

Now what I want to suggest is, that when we cherry pick from the Koran those disturbing verses, and we don't look at *these* verses from our own scriptures, we may be a little bit dishonest. Maybe a huge bit dishonest. The problem is power. When religions want power over people's lives, it is a problem whether it is Islam, or Christianity, or Judaism. The standard that all the major religions should hold themselves to, is that we use persuasion, not coercion. In the verse that we heard from Islam, the question is asked, how can I be a righteous person? Do you remember the answer? When you want for others what you want for yourself, you'll be a righteous person. Does that sound familiar at all? It's the Golden Rule, which is there in Islam just as centrally as it is in Christianity.

We tell a story of history that's very different than it appears to people who live in a different place. And one of the things we leave out of the story is our own military invasions into their countries, taking over those countries, re-naming the countries, taking their resources, putting up puppet dictators. But we start from there and call it a religious struggle because we know they're intolerant. The war in the Middle East is not about religion. It's about land. Our leaders have told you it's about religion to keep you from looking and holding us to the same standard as we do our opponents in a struggle. Jihad is something that doesn't have to be violent. In some ways it's more mature an idea than that we simply make it a better world just by being nice. There is a struggle.

One of the things I misunderstood about Gandhi is that he was a tough bird. He wasn't just nice, he got in your face and he made you uncomfortable for oppressing somebody else. But he didn't do it violently,

that's a jihad. He didn't call it *jihad*, he called it *satyagraha*, but it means the same thing. It means truth struggle. If you care about the world you will share in that calling to struggle for a better world. That's one thing we share with Islam.

A second thing is when Islam focuses on monotheism and it says there is no God but Allah. Realize that Allah is not just the name of somebody's god, it means THE God. In the Old Testament, you see one of the names for God is Elohim. It's the same root – El, Allah. What that means is when the prophet looked around him and saw the struggle, the battle, the misery, he felt it was because there wasn't a common standard for everybody. So one way to understand the call to monotheism, which can be a huge problem, is to hear it as a call to universality. To use the same principles on ourselves we use on those across the line. Wouldn't that be refreshing? If any nation in the whole world wanted for the people across the boundary line the same things they want for themselves, that would be the kind of universalism and monotheism that would actually be helpful.

Now, what I want to do is challenge the idea that they're more brainwashed than we are. And in Texas it's pretty easy to state my case. I mentioned last week I was so excited that Arizona, for a short period of time, had stolen the coveted title of dumbest state in the union. Well, we took the trophy back. (The State Board of Education – we want to certainly have a nuanced view of history that we teach our children – how is that not brainwashing?) Here's a wonderful story that came out this week, I think you'll like this. "Copernicus re-buried as hero 500 years later." This shows you the crest of the wave of Christian theology.

"Nicolas Copernicus, the 16th century astronomer who's findings were condemned by the Roman Catholic church as heretical, was re-buried by Polish priests as a hero today nearly 500 years after he was laid to rest in an unmarked grave. On Saturday his remains were blessed with holy water by some of Poland's highest ranking clerics, before the honor guard ceremoniously carried the coffin through the imposing red cathedral and lowered it back into the same spot where his skull and other bones were found in 2005."

Now here's the quote.

"Today's funeral has symbolic value, and that is the gesture of reconciliation between science and faith. Science and faith can be reconciled."

You just gotta wait 500 years!

Now if you want to maintain that we are not propagandized, you have a tough case. Let's talk about the oil spill just a second. Who did the oil spill? BP. What does BP [stand for]? British Petroleum. What was a British oil company doing drilling on our turf? Whoops! You mean to tell me the people that have been saying they want to drill our oil first, because they want us to be energy independent, are letting other countries come in and deplete the oil? Why, that would almost seem like they weren't really concerned about America! They were *never* concerned about America. The reason they wanted to drill here was because they could make money here, and couldn't make as much "over there". Now think about it – what sense does it make to say depleting our own oil will make us energy independent? Only a goober would believe that.

Propaganda is universal across the board. And the only people who are not propagandized have made a lifelong commitment to test themselves and the truth of what they believe. Belief is the problem here. When you are taught that religion is believing something and not questioning it, there are going to be problems - whether you're Islamic, or Christian, or Jewish. That's just a problem, and you can see it in everybody else in the world, right? When somebody has a belief, and they hold on to it against science,

against reality, you see that's a problem and you call them a fanatic. But the problem is, it's happening here too. Do you know why we have the classics? It's not because of the church, the church was burning the classics and it was Islam that saved them. So when we hear the call to universality from Islam, there are people who misunderstand that call as though it is saying you have to be a Muslim. The heart of the message is universality and that is the meeting place, if we, by "God", are referring to the ground of reality, whatever that is. And remember, Islam will not let you make pictures of it, will only portray it with patterns -that would be a meeting place for the religions of the world.

A third part of Islam that I think we need to reclaim is the idea of submission. In particular, the idea that Islam by nature mistreats women. Now, Islam is not generally feminist, and I grieve that. Anybody here think that Christianity is feminist? Anybody here think that Judaism is feminist? No. All of the major religions have got a major reformation based on getting the guy thing to the side. Most of the stories, (the horrible stories about women being brutalized) that you will see in the news are a result of local customs, and not Islam. The point is, those stories happen here too, but we don't link them to the religion. When that happens in Islamic countries, we link that to Islam, but we don't make that false link with Christianity when it happens here.

Let me tell you a story, here's a good story. Not a good story, it's a horrifying story.

In Brazil last year, when a 9-year old girl was found to be pregnant with twins as a result of being raped by her stepfather, who had repeatedly abused her, the girl, who weighed 66 pounds and would likely have died if the pregnancy were carried to term, underwent an abortion. A Brazilian archbishop condemned the operation, and declared the doctors and the mother excommunicated; but not the stepfather.

Now, what if you'd read that from an Islamic country? Would you generalize the whole [religion]? Let's do *one more test* on that. Let's count the number of female popes.

We'll play the game one more time. Who's more tolerant? These are beautiful views of women - and this could be from the Koran, or it could be from the Bible.

Let a woman quietly receive instructions with entire submissiveness. I do not allow a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet.

Can you spot that one? Does that have Paul's fingerprints on it? It's 1st Timothy.

Let women keep silent in the gatherings, for they are not permitted to speak, but let them subject themselves just as the law also says, and if they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home, for it is improper for a woman to speak in the gathering.

Now I won't do a poll here because the women can't vote, but (*laughter*)

1st Corinthians:.

But every woman who has her head uncovered while praying disgraces her head.

What I want to suggest is that we've used a double standard. And I don't want to just suggest it, I want to scream it: *we have used a double standard on Islam and Christianity*. That does not mean *they* don't have work to do, but it means *we also have work to do*. The task of joining together to be fair to all of

humankind, and to embrace science, and work on universal human rights, is something that every world religion has to dedicate itself to. I want to suggest, that as a Christian - if that's how you identify yourself - you have a duty to try to love your enemies. If you call yourself a Christian, you have a duty not to take up the enemies that anyone else tells you to take up. All religions have to get past power, all religions have to get past belief, and get down to what the prophets have really come to tell us that *love* is at the core. It's the core of life, it's the core of the universe, and it's the core of each of us. Jesus said the answer to the problems of the world is to love your enemies. Love begins when we listen.