

# The Uniqueness of Christianity

---

“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

(Matthew 11:28–30)

Jesus’s offer of rest in the above quote calls our attention to the one factor that sets Christianity apart from the other religions of the world (including distorted versions of Christianity). All other religions and philosophies ultimately have a performance-oriented way of thinking about how to obtain whatever they think matters most, whether it is finding acceptance with God, having a sense of transcendent meaning, or getting the maximum amount of pleasure and happiness out of this life. In one way or another, all other outlooks say that salvation, satisfaction, or whatever is seen as life’s supreme goal is obtained through our attitudes, intentions, efforts, feelings, and experiences. By way of contrast, the gospel of Jesus Christ reveals what God has done to secure salvation for spiritually helpless people who deserve nothing but eternal condemnation. Only in the Christian religion do we hear the announcement of divine grace, the good news that invites the undeserving to receive and rest upon Christ alone for salvation. The central message of the Christian faith is not an exhortation for us to do something in order to get into God’s good graces. On the contrary, the gospel announces the good news of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

## The Bad News: Our Guilt

Not everyone who hears the gospel hears it as good news. The reason why this is so is because we can only hear the gospel as good news if we first understand the greatness of our sin and misery. Jesus’s offer of rest in Matthew 11 is made to those who are “heavy laden,” those who are burdened by the guilt of their sin. We are made aware of our state of spiritual misery through the working of God the Holy Spirit, who convicts us “concerning sin and righteousness and judgment” (Jn. 16:8), opening our eyes to see our desperate plight as transgressors of God’s holy law. When this takes place, we realize that our deepest problem is not the bad things that happen to us externally, but the wretched condition of our rebellious hearts. We cannot shift the blame for our sins and failings to other people or to our circumstances. The reason why we do the things that we shouldn’t do and fail to do the things that we should do is because our hearts, like the hearts of all people since Adam’s first transgression, are corrupted by sin.

God does not evaluate our lives by weighing our good deeds against our evil deeds. The Bible tells us that “whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for

all of it.” (Jas. 2:10) No one measures up to the righteous requirements of God’s law. Even our good deeds are polluted by our sin. This is why the Bible says, “For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.’” (Gal. 3:10) Because God is a God of perfect justice, he cannot overlook our sin. It has to be punished by eternal death. There is absolutely nothing that we can do to avert God’s holy wrath.

## **The Good News: God’s Grace**

We need someone else to stand in our place to fulfill God’s law and to bear its curse on our behalf. This is exactly what God has done for us in the gospel (“gospel” simply means “good news”). The gospel declares that the eternal Son of God humbled himself by taking on our flesh and blood in order to secure redemption for all who will believe in him.

Because of what Jesus Christ accomplished in his life and death, a great exchange takes place when we lay hold of him by faith. Our sins are reckoned to him on the cross and his perfect righteousness is reckoned to us before God. The Bible puts it this way: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us - for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree’” (Gal. 3:13).

The gospel declares that God pronounces sinners to be righteous on the basis of the righteousness of another: the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ. This is the doctrine of justification by faith alone. And our faith is not a work that we can take credit for but is something that God the Holy Spirit produces within us. This is what Jesus meant when he said, “no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father” (Jn. 6:65; see also Jn. 6:44; Acts 16:14; Eph. 2:8; Phil. 1:29). Faith is merely the hand by which we receive Christ and the saving benefits that God pours out upon those who belong to him. Apart from Christ, we are all under the crushing burden of sin and the eternal punishment that it deserves. This is true whether or not a person realizes it. Our subjective feelings do not change the objective reality of God’s just judgment against sin. It is only by being united to Christ that our sin-enslaved souls can find true freedom and true rest.

## **Our Response: Grateful Obedience**

The fact that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone does not mean that we are free to go on sinning after we have placed our trust in Christ. The gospel saves us from both the guilt of sin and the power of sin. The former (freedom from sin’s guilt) has to do with the doctrine of justification, while the latter (freedom from sin’s power) has to do with the doctrine of sanctification. Sanctification is about God’s continued outworking of his saving purposes in the lives of his children, conforming us to the likeness of Christ. This aspect of salvation can be summed up under the heading of “gratitude”, which is the proper motivation for holy living. As Christians, we are so thankful for what Christ has done for us that we

want to spend the rest of our lives in loving service to him. We are now at war with sin, and we strive to walk in God's ways.

Christian obedience is a necessary fruit of salvation. Our lives are not to be characterized by the practice of sinning but by the practice of righteousness (see 1 Jn. 3:9-10). The gift of salvation includes the gift of a renewed heart, a heart that hates sin and loves righteousness (see Ezek. 36:25-27). When we place our faith in Christ, we are freed from the burdensome yoke of sin and are brought under Christ's easy and light yoke. He is our teacher and our guide, and his law is our rule of life. Jesus leads us in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. While we still sin, we are bothered by our sin rather than comfortable in it. True Christians want to do what our Lord commands, and we strive to do so. We do not do this by relying upon our strength or by trusting in our merit, but by believing that God will provide all that is needed for the completion of his saving work in us (See 1 Cor. 10:13; 2 Pet. 1:3).

## **The Role of the Church**

One other thing that needs to be mentioned is that the Christian faith is not just a private matter between the individual believer and God. It also involves being a part of a local church and being under the oversight and authority of church leaders. This needs to be emphasized because many who profess to be Christians in our day are rejecting the idea of "institutional Christianity." This results in a situation where Christianity means whatever any individual Christian wants it to mean. This is certainly not God's intention. To prevent this, Jesus not only rules over his people inwardly in our hearts, but also outwardly through the church's official ministry. This ministry is the means that he has given to gather, protect, build up, and care for his church (see Acts 20:28; Eph. 4:11-16; Heb. 13:17).

It is the duty of every professing Christian to gather for worship with fellow believers each Lord's Day (Sunday) and to be accountable to the leadership of a local church where the gospel is faithfully taught and upheld. These are the basic commitments of church membership.