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How would you define “religion”? Take a moment and come up with a definition in your head.

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It’s difficult, isn’t it? You could say religion is a belief in God. But then what about Buddhists? Many of them don’t believe in any kind of god at all.

You could say religion is a belief in something supernatural. But even people who don’t believe in anything supernatural still share a lot in common with those who do. For example: many atheists speak about their life being guided for a purpose. Another example: many evolutionists have faith that their beliefs are true even though they have not seen the evidence. In many ways those who don’t believe in the supernatural still seem to have a religion just as much as anyone else.

So how do you define religion? One definition that I have always found helpful is this: your religion is your answer to the important questions. Who are you? Where did you come from? Where are you going? Why are you here and what are you doing here?

Today, we are in the second week of Epiphany, a time during the church year when we ask a very important question: Who is Jesus? Today, as we see John the Baptist tell us who Jesus is, we also find an answer to who we are. We are christs. Not only do we belong to Christ, but each of us are to be Christ to the world. God has chosen you and me to point people to the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

At the beginning of our Epistle lesson from Acts 13:38-49, Paul and Barnabas again give us the basic message of salvation: Paul says, *“I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is set free from every sin, a justification you were not able to obtain under the law of Moses.”*

This message of forgiveness through Jesus is the one thing every person needs to hear. We talked before about religion being our answers to the big questions. One of those big questions is, “Why is morality so important to everyone?” “Why does pretty much every person care so much about being good?”

When we are caught doing something good, we normally attribute that to just who we are, right? But when we are caught doing something wrong, we more easily blame that on the situation or someone else, right? Why do we do that? Why not the other way around? Why don’t we make excuses for being good and attribute the wrong things we do to just who we are? Why is it so important to all of us that we be

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good people?

The Bible tells us that this is part of the natural knowledge of God. God put our consciences in us. He wrote his law on our hearts. Even people who have never read the Bible and never heard about Jesus know that they ought to be good people. But the sad truth is, none of us are as good as we ought to be.

Benjamin Franklin once made it his goal to become morally perfect. He set out 13 virtues which he believed summed up what it meant to be a good person. Then he planned a rigorous schedule so that he paid careful attention to his actions every day and kept detailed notes about how well he had done and where he had messed up. His plan was to work at each individual virtue until he had mastered it, and then he would move on to the next until he had perfected them all. After working hard at this for a long time, he finally gave up at virtue number 3. He kept backsliding, he kept failing, and finally he just gave up. Of 13 virtues, he gave up at number 3. He found that he could not be good enough.

All of us have been there. An honest look at ourselves shows plenty of missed opportunities to do good we ought. We all have of regrets too; things we should have done but didn't, and no amount of effort on our part will take away those past failures. Even if you and I could be perfect from now on, that would not take away the wrongs of our past. Who are we? The Bible is clear. We are sinners.

But Paul points us again to this basic message of forgiveness through Jesus. Everyone who believes in Jesus is set free from their sin. No matter how bad those sins have been, no matter how many there have been, no matter how guilty you have felt, through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you.

This is a status before God that no amount of obedience could get us. Because all our efforts to obey the law, all our efforts to be good people cannot take away our sins. But through Jesus, all our sins are forgiven, past, present, future, all of them. God looks at us as though we are perfect.

Who are we? The Bible is clear. Through Jesus, we are forgiven sinners. This new relationship with God turns our life around. Obedience to God is no longer a desperate attempt to prove ourselves, but instead it is simply who we are in Jesus. As forgiven sinners, our love for God is a reaction to the great love he shows us in Jesus. Through Christ, we learn that being good comes not from outward obedience but from an inward love for our God who has so greatly loved us. We learn what it actually means to be good. But these can only come through faith in the Lamb of God who takes away our sins.

"Who Jesus is" is the basic message of God's Word, and this is the basic message that the whole world needs to hear. By God's grace you know it, you

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believe it, and you have it. But there is a whole world out there that still needs to know it.

But even though the world needs it, the world will still oppose it. Again, in our lesson we find this condemnation on those who laugh at God's Word. We see some of the Jews reject forgiveness through Jesus. We see them try everything they could to stop Paul and Barnabas from spreading the gospel to other people. They talked abusively against Paul and Barnabas, they made fun of them, they trashed what they said, they contradicted their message to try and throw people into confusion.

The world today will try the same things. The world still talks abusively about Christians. The world still trashes the message we have. The world still contradicts us.

But in spite of the discouragement, threats, and danger we may face by sharing God's Word, notice also this incredible encouragement that Paul gives us.

In our lesson for today from the Old Testament, Isaiah 49:1-7, we read another of those "Servant Songs." These are sections telling us about God's special servant, God's Messiah, his Christ, his Anointed One. In this section, verse 6 specifically, God speaks to his Chosen Servant and says, "*It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept.*"

God could have brought salvation only for his chosen nation of Israel. After all, none of us Gentiles deserve salvation. God would have shown grace upon grace to humanity by only saving that group of people, but he didn't only save them. God considered it too small a thing to only save the Jews. No, instead, God wanted to make his Christ, "*a light for the Gentiles, that [he might] bring... salvation to the ends of the earth.*" God wanted to save you and me too. And God wants still more people saved.

But notice this, in this passage God is speaking to his Christ, to Jesus, right? But now if we go back to Acts 13, Paul and Barnabas took those words to the Christ as a command for *them*. They say, "*For this is what the Lord has commanded us: 'I have made you light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.'*"

You see what's going on here? Paul and Barnabas saw these words which applied to Jesus as applying to them also. How can that be? Because they were bringing Christ to the Gentiles. By them sharing the gospel message, they were making Jesus that light for the Gentiles, they were bringing salvation through Jesus to the ends of the earth. They were being christs to this world by bringing the message of *the* Christ to those around them.

You see what this means for you and me? We too are called to be christs. We

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too are called to bring the light of salvation to the ends of the earth. And we do that in the same way Paul and Barnabas did, by telling people about forgiveness through Jesus.

The world is not going to come to Jesus. People aren't just gonna randomly open up Bibles and start reading them again. Sinners aren't out of nowhere going to start attending church services again.

Just as Jesus looked down from heaven, and saw that we weren't going to save ourselves, so he brought salvation to us; so too, we need to recognize that people in this world aren't going to come to Jesus by themselves, we need to be Christs in the world by bringing the message of Christ to them.

It won't be easy. We talked earlier about all the struggles we will face, but as Christians, this is simply who we are. We are Christs. We are lights to the Gentiles who point people to the light of the world. We bring God's salvation to the ends of the earth by pointing to the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Dear friends in Christ, one of the biggest questions we will ever answer is simply, "Who are you?" The Bible is clear on that. You are a sinner. You are forgiven through faith in Christ. And you are now called to be Christ to the world around you: to love as Christ has loved you, to share the message of salvation as God has shared that message with you. This is our identity. This is our answer to that question. We are Christs. Amen.