

## 1 Sermon, July 22, 2012

Texts: Galatians 5:13-16, James 2:8-13

Title: "Christianity Compared: Freedom vs. Discipline in Christianity and Islam"

1. Introduction – highlight freedom in Christ
2. Islam's origin
3. Christianity's origin
4. What does Islam feel like?
5. What does Christianity feel like?
6. Christian freedom

### 1. Introduction – highlight freedom in Christ

I chose this sermon series because I wanted to highlight some aspects of Christianity that make it distinct from other world religions. This week, I'm talking about the difference between Christianity and Islam in the area of freedom and discipline.

### 2. Islam's origin

If you look at the beginning of Islam, you can see that it was founded in the midst of a terrible environment. The Arabian peninsula in Mohammed's day was a violent place, with many warring tribes vying for supremacy. It was also a center for pagan worship, although both Jewish and Christian worshippers lived there.

Mecca, in Mohammad's day, was close to a functioning anarchy. There was very little order.

Muhammad, when he had his revelations, became a political leader, first in Medina, where he organized his followers into a religious society submitting to the will of God. The word Islam means "submission" or surrender to the will of God.

Those first Muslims in Medina were not only a religious society. They were also soldiers. The neighboring communities were afraid of Mohammad and his influence, and the combined armies of Arabia tried to defeat him. But Mohammad and the Muslims defeated their enemies, and eventually took over Mecca. Muhammad created order out of chaos in Mecca and in the Arabian peninsula.

So if you look at the founding of Islam, you can see that it was founded in war, and discipline was an essential component to winning battles. Islam is, in many ways, a righteous battle, and Muslims are called to submit to the will of God and win an inner battle against sin, and an outer battle against evil.

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It is not surprising, then, that the Five Pillars of Islam have an aura of disciplined action about them:

1. Declaration of Faith: I testify that there is no god except Allah and I testify that Muhammad is a messenger of Allah."
2. Prayer at five specified times per day
3. Giving 2.5% of one's accumulated wealth per yr to the poor or needy
4. Fasting during the month of Ramadan
5. The Hajj, or pilgrimage to Mecca

### 3. Christianity's origin

Christian faith, instead of five pillars, has several "commandments" by Jesus. But each of these commandments seems a lot more like a principle for living rather than a specific, measurable action.

1. The great commandment: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind, and your neighbor as yourself.
2. The new commandment (John 13:34-35): Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."
3. Great commission: Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.

Christianity started out as a counter-cultural movement.

Where Muhammad was a political (as well as religious) leader, who brought order out of chaos, Jesus was totally outside the power structure. Jesus preached an alternative to the Roman power structure, one that was not about conquering, but about living an abundant life in the midst of forces you could not control.

The kingdom that Jesus preached about was "within you" or "among you." It was like seed that grew, the farmer knew not how. It was like a woman in search of a coin, who when she found it, went out celebrating. The kingdom was like an incredibly expensive pearl, that you could sell everything else in order to obtain.

Jesus, far from being a political leader, was a wandering rabbi who "had no place to lay his head." Muhammad was married to his first wife for 25 years. After she died, he had another 12 wives or concubines.

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Mohammad was settled in one place. Jesus had no wives, and was constantly moving.

If Islam is a disciplined march, Christianity is a circle dance performed by amateurs who are trying to get the steps right – all the while listening to each other as they try to hear the voice of the savior.

Jesus didn't talk a whole lot about discipline. In the gospels, he talked about commandments 11 times. He talked about love 36 times. Joy is mentioned 24 times.

Jesus, rather than talking about war, talked about non-violence. Instead of being a dispute-solver, like Mohammad, he said to one man, "who made me judge over you?"

#### 4. What does Islam feel like?

Both religions are monotheistic (although the Quran states that the idea of the Trinity is an error, because God is one, not three). Both have a high emphasis on morality. Both are Abrahamic faiths. But Christianity and Islam *feel* very different.

If we try to get a sense of what each of these religions is like, the greatest difference to me is the discipline practiced in Islam, versus the freedom in Christianity.

The scriptures of each faith are a good example of this. It has been said that the New Testament points to Christ, the Word, and Christ is at the center.

In contrast, in Islam, Mohammed points to the Holy Quran, and Mohammad is not worshipped, but rather the words of the Quran are considered holy, for they were dictated by the angel Gabriel and recited by Mohammad to scribes who put it down on paper.

So the Quran reads like a proclamation, rather than a collection of different kinds of works, as the Christian Scriptures are. The Quran does not include letters, or parables or psalms.

Here, too, we can see the value of discipline in Islam. One of the greatest honors a young man can achieve in Islam is to memorize the Quran. This is no easy task.

Here are some of the more eyebrow-raising portions of the Quran:

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### Surah 24:2

The woman and the man guilty of adultery or fornication, - flog each of them with a hundred stripes: Let not compassion move you in their case, in a matter prescribed by Allah, if ye believe in Allah and the Last Day: and let a party of the Believers witness their punishment.

### Surah 24:31

And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their husband's fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their women, or the slaves whom their right hands possess, or male servants free of physical needs, or small children who have no sense of the shame of sex; and that they should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden ornaments. And O ye Believers! turn ye all together towards Allah, that ye may attain Bliss.

### Surah 5:38

As to the thief, Male or female, cut off his or her hands: a punishment by way of example, from Allah, for their crime: and Allah is Exalted in power.

### Surah 33:36

It is not fitting for a Believer, man or woman, when a matter has been decided by Allah and His Apostle to have any option about their decision: if any one disobeys Allah and His Apostle, he is indeed on a clearly wrong Path.

All of these passages highlight the emphasis on discipline and order.

## 5. What does Christianity feel like?

If we want to get a sense about what Christianity is like, we could turn to the two scripture readings for today from Galatians and James. In these readings, we can see that the faith is about the freedom to love unselfishly and unconditionally:

Galatians 5 reads:

"For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but

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through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh." Galatians 5:13-16, NRSV.

It's not as though Christian faith says you are free to do whatever you want. A little later in Galatians, Paul warns against:

fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these.

Instead, we are to live out the fruit of the Spirit:

love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Freedom in Christ is freedom to Love. James tells us:

"You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

James also reminds us that forgiveness is central to the Christian faith. Forgiveness is part of our freedom. James says:

"So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment." James 2:12-13

In closing, I should say that I value the discipline shown by Muslims. I think it would be great if Christians prayed five times a day. But I value even more greatly my freedom in Christ.

I am free in Christ because I know God has created me capable and resilient.

I am free in Christ because I am forgiven.

I am free in Christ because I am not bound by a set of rules; rather I am following my savior and seeking to be like him.

I am free in Christ because I trust in God's care for me in this life and the next, and that frees me from the fear of failure.

I am free in Christ because I know that I'm part of something greater than myself.

Thanks be to God!