

175 and Counting: No Other Name

Acts 4:12

By [Dr. J. Ligon Duncan III](#)

If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to open them with me to Acts chapter 4 verse 12, although we're also going to look back at verse 11 because it's very important for the topic that we're going to be looking at today. We've been in a series called, "175 and Counting." I've had a number of you express appreciation for some of the topics we've covered but also puzzle at the name of the series, "175 and Counting." It refers to the number of years the congregation has existed - 175 years. And the idea is to look at very important issues for us as we go forward together, bearing witness to the Lord Jesus Christ, living the Christian life, heralding the Gospel of the Word. And so "175 and Counting" is the name of the series.

Now so far we've looked at a number of things together but I want to remind you of two things in particular that we've thought about. We have thought about what a Christian disciple is. Now there are many Biblical ways that you can describe a disciple and there are many important Biblical truths that are necessary to understand all that goes into being a disciple, especially how one becomes a disciple because we become a disciple of God through His own grace, through the Gospel, through the work of Christ. But as Jesus addresses the issue of "What do My disciples look like?" in Matthew chapter 7 verses 24 to 27, one of the things He makes clear to us there is that His disciples hear and do what He teaches. Now that's actually very important for what we're going to study today because Jesus is saying this — His disciples believe what He teaches and they do what He tells them to do. That's one of the hallmarks of real disciples of Jesus Christ. They believe what He teaches and they do what He tells them to do.

Then, the last time we were together, we were thinking about what Jesus taught about the Bible, what the Bible says about the Bible, especially the Bible's truth claims, because we live in a day and time where not only unbelievers but some professing Christians call into question the authority, the infallibility, the inspiration, and the inerrancy of Scripture. And so we spent some time thinking about what the Bible claims about itself, what Jesus taught about the Bible, and we said that disciples of Jesus who hear what He teaches and believe it and do what He says will have a high view of the Scripture because Jesus had a high view of the Scripture and He wanted His disciples to have a high view of the Scripture too. Both of those things will come to bear on the issue that we're going

to look at today because today we're going to tackle a very difficult issue — universalism.

Now you may be thinking to yourself, “Why in the world would Ligon address universalism?” because there has not been so much as a syllable uttered from this pulpit in 175 years in favor of universalism and that is true and I thank God for it. But you live in a pluralistic culture which presents you with two problems. One is, unbelievers look at you and if you believe that Jesus is the only way of salvation, many of them say you are arrogant and hateful; you are narrow-minded and bigoted to believe that Jesus is the only way. How arrogant of you to think that the only way to God is the way you think the only way to God is. And that poses a challenge to Christian witness. And very often fine Christians waffle in the face of that challenge. Have you ever watched when the Larry King Live Show was running? Have you ever watched the cavalcade of religious figures, many of whom are Christians, many of whom are fine Christians, and Larry King will invariably ask them what? “Do you believe that Jesus is the only way of salvation?” And most of them say what? They waffle in their answer. Why do they do that? Because they know that the answer they are going to give if they are giving the Bible's answer is going to be offensive to the audience that is watching that program. In other words, they are influenced by the way the culture perceived their answer to that question and it makes them reticent to give the answer. So that's one problem - the problem of the world looking at Christians who believe that Jesus is the only way of salvation and saying you are hateful and you are arrogant to believe that.

The other problem comes from with inside Christianity because there are many Christians who, because of that very phenomenon I've just described, have decided that they are embarrassed about Christian teaching on this issue and therefore they want to change Christianity from being exclusive to being inclusive because they think that makes Christianity more loving. In other words, they have accepted the critique of the world and they have decided to create a kinder, gentler Christianity and so they have rejected the teaching that Jesus is the only way of salvation in the name of being more loving. But consequently, they have undermined the foundation of the Christian faith which is Jesus Christ - who He is, what He did, and why He came to do what He did.

And that is why I want to address this question today. I want to address it from both of those directions. Let me say them again so you'll understand exactly what I'm trying to get at today. I'm trying to get at the issue first of non-Christians who view Christianity and our claims of the exclusive way of salvation through Jesus Christ, they view those claims as mean or hateful or bigoted and they view those claims as arrogant. “How dare you say that everybody else is wrong and you're right! How could you be so dismissive and condescending and bigoted towards other people who have a different point of view?” So I want to address the question from that standpoint but I also want to address it from the standpoint of Christians who are embarrassed by Christian exclusivism, by the exclusive truth

claims of Christ as the only way of salvation, and so they opt for inclusivism, that there are many ways to God and Jesus is one of those ways or a best way but just one of many ways to God. So that's what I want to do together today. Before we look at the Scriptures and read them and consider this important issue, let's pray and ask for God's help and blessing.

Heavenly Father, thank You for Your Word and thank You that as we think through a thorny and difficult issue, an issue that faces us all if we're going to be faithful to Jesus Christ in a pluralistic world, we pray that we would think Your thoughts after You, that we would not make up our answers to this as we go along but that we would go back to the sure foundation of Jesus and the Scriptures. I pray this in Jesus' name, amen.

This is the Word of God. Hear it. Acts 4 verse 12. And just to note, Peter is in the middle of a message as he says these words; he's preaching a sermon:

“And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”

Amen, and thus ends this reading of God's holy, inspired, and inerrant Word. May He write its eternal truth upon all our hearts.

The issue of the exclusive Christian claim based on the teaching of Jesus and the Bible that Jesus is the only way of salvation when it comes into contact with a pluralistic culture that is relativistic and says, “All roads lead up the mountain, all ways lead to heaven, every world religion has truth in it, Christianity just as well as the others, and therefore we would be arrogant to say that Jesus is the only way or that the Bible is the only way of salvation.” That issue of the confrontation, the conflict between those two views is regular for us in the culture today and it's not just something happening out there; it's something happening in here.

Just within the last couple of years there was a death of a young person in our community and that young person was from a non-Christian religion, but many of our own young people were dear friends with that young man and they thought very highly of him. He was an intelligent, wonderful person, and it deeply disturbed many of our Bible-believing Christian young people as they thought about the issue of what was this young man, who was not a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, not a follower of the truth of the Gospel revealed in the Scripture, what was his eternal destiny going to be? And they wrestled with that, some of them even saying, “You know, I'm not sure I want to go to heaven if he's not going to be there.” This is not an abstract question out there. This is a question especially that presses on the younger generation of this church because pluralism is dominant in our culture and the Christian message sounds odd and even mean to many in the secular audience. We need to understand how to respond to this in a way that is God-honoring, that is Biblical, and most of all that is loyal to Jesus.

THE REACTION OF NON-CHRISTIANS TO THE EXCLUSIVE TRUTH CLAIMS OF CHRIST

So I want to look at this question today from two perspectives. First, from the perspective of the reaction of non-Christians to exclusive truth claims of Christ, the Gospel, and Christianity. There are many people who are offended by a Christian praying in the name of Christ in public or by a Christian sharing the Gospel to someone else who is from a non-Christian background or an unbelieving background because they view that as an act of dominance, as an act of condescension, as an act of arrogance, and ultimately a mean and even a hateful attitude. So how does a Christian respond to that when someone says, "Do you believe that Jesus is the only way of salvation?" You're sitting in a university classroom; there are all sorts of people around you who don't believe in Jesus Christ as the only way of salvation. You, as a Christian, you've just been asked, "Do you believe in Jesus as the only way of salvation?" When you're answering that question, "Yes," and that's the right answer, knowing that you are offending some people who are around you, how are you supposed to take that in? How do you process that?

One important thing for you to remember, my friends, is as believers, we believe this not because we thought it up. Not only have two thousand years of Christians believed it before us, but the Bible teaches it, the apostles taught it, and Jesus Himself taught it. The reason, ultimately, that we believe that Jesus is the only way of salvation is because Jesus said He was the only way of salvation and we trust in Him for salvation. Remember, let's go back to what Jesus said. "How do you know one of My disciples? He hears what I teach and he does what I say." So our believing that Jesus is the only way of salvation, far from being from a stance of arrogance, is because we humbly accept what Jesus has claimed about Himself. We humbly believe what the Bible says from Genesis 1 to the last chapter of Revelation. The whole Bible is one long argument against idolatry. From Genesis 1:1 on, the Bible claims there is one true God and all other gods are false gods. Did you notice that was in the call to worship today? It comes right out of Psalm 95. That in a call to worship Israel would remind all the people gathering in Jerusalem that the God that they were about to worship is the only true God and that all other gods are false gods. That has been taught from the very first chapter of Genesis all the way through to the last chapter of Revelation. Christianity is based on an exclusive truth claim about God. There is one true God and all other gods are false gods.

But we believe that not because we thought that up last week but because we believe the authority of Scripture and we believe what Jesus has taught. And Jesus taught this so clearly. For instance, in John 14 verse 6 what did He say? "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but by Me." When I say that I believe that when I'm asked I'm not being arrogant, I'm listening

to what Jesus taught me to believe. So the reason that we say what we say and believe what we believe is because we love Jesus and because we love the people that we're sharing the Gospel with. Sharing the Gospel is not an act of hate; it's the ultimate act of love.

Many of you love the secular comedian Penn Jillette. Now Penn Jillette is an atheist. And there's an interesting story on the internet and I'll link to it for you in *The First Epistle* this week and you can go look at it. It will only take you five minutes to look at the video. There was a Christian who went to see Penn Jillette's comedy routine in Las Vegas a couple of years ago. And Penn is part of the comedy team Penn and Teller. And after that comedy routine this Christian went to Mr. Jillette just to say, "I loved your comedy routine. I've always loved your comedy, I find you intelligent and witty and funny." And he used very complimentary words. And then the man went away and after the line had gone through speaking to Mr. Jillette this man circled back around and very humbly and very carefully the man said, "Mr. Jillette, I wonder if you wouldn't be offended if I gave a Bible to you." And the man gave Mr. Jillette a Gideon Bible. Now how do you think the atheist, Penn Jillette, thought about a Christian giving him a Bible? Well, you can go see his thoughts on this event on YouTube. And here's what Mr. Jillette said. "If that man believes that Jesus is the only way of salvation and that believing on Jesus is the only thing that can save a person from an eternity of hell, then the most hateful thing that man could do would be not to give me a Bible and not to tell me about the Gospel. If that man believes what he believes, the most loving thing that he can do is give me a Bible and share with me about the Gospel."

Now isn't that an interesting response from an atheist? A much more clear headed response than many people who profess to be Christians give to this issue. The atheist understood if you really believe that there is a hell — and there is — and you really believe the Gospel and you really trust in Christ and you really believe what He teaches then because you love people and you want them to be blessed with God for eternity you will share the Gospel with them, not as an act of arrogance and hate but as an act of humility and love. Why is it that we, as Christians, stand up in a pluralistic world and say, "Yes, Jesus is the only way"? Because we didn't think it up ourselves, we learned this from the lips of Jesus, and because we love people and we want them to be with God forever. And by the way, if our non-Christians don't know that we love them that way then we need to do a better job of loving them. They ought to know that we genuinely, tangibly love them and that when we speak the Gospel to them we speak it not out of hate and contempt and arrogance, we speak it out of love.

CHRISTIANS EMBARRASSED BY THE EXCLUSIVE TRUTH CLAIMS OF CHRIST

What about Christians who are embarrassed by this teaching? I'm going to tell

you two stories and just two stories that have happened in the last year, both words from ministers. But before I tell you that let me say, when you as a Christian are embarrassed in your current cultural situation, your current societal situation which is pluralistic and relativistic and thinks that exclusivism is bad and inclusivism is good and its exclusive about exclusivity, that is, it can tolerate anybody except somebody who makes an exclusive truth claim, when you are embarrassed about the exclusive truth claim of the Scriptures that Jesus is the only way of salvation and that's what Peter has just said here, don't answer that question socially; answer it Biblically. When you're wrestling through the claim, don't answer it socially. Don't answer that question based on the way you think society would want you to answer that question or don't base your answer to that question based on your personal experience; base it on the Scripture.

In fact, I think it would be a wonderful thought exercise for every believer from time to time to think about the best unbelieving friends that you have, the person that you think of most highly, the person whose intelligence and friendliness and friendship and character qualities you admire the most who is not a Christian, and in your mind picture standing at his or her grave and answering this question. "Even standing at my friend's grave, my friend who didn't believe in Christ, who didn't believe the Bible, who didn't accept the Gospel, do I still believe what Jesus said or will I change my belief because I'm standing here in a scene that I don't want to have to think about?" I think it would be a good thought experiment for us all to think about where our belief ultimately derives from. Does it derive from what we want to be true or does it derive from what the Bible says?

Now with that as a preface to this story, my exhortation is simply this — don't think through this socially; think through it Biblically. Let me point you to Acts 4:12. Peter is speaking to a multitude of Jews. Now let me ask you a question. Do you think that Peter thinks that what he says is going to be offensive to the Jewish people that he's preaching to at Pentecost? Or, this is after Pentecost — in the days after Pentecost? Yes, he knows that what he's about to say is offensive. Does that stop him from saying it? No. Why? Because Peter is talking about the only way of salvation. Look at what he says in Acts 4:12. "There is salvation in no one else." Now stop right there. In who? Go back to verse 11. "This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone." So do you think that Peter knew that what he was going to say was going to be offensive? The Jesus that I'm proclaiming to you is the only way of salvation you rejected. Ah, yes, he knew that it was going to be offensive. Why did he say it, because he was hateful? He was a Jew. Because he was mean? He loved them and was ready to die in order for them to come to faith in Jesus Christ. He told them because it was truth and because it was loving. What did he say? "There is no other name under heaven." And if you go look at that phrase, "under heaven," it's a Hebrew idiom. You'll find it in the Old Testament and the New Testament. It means, "absolutely everything and everyone." There's no other name among absolutely everything, everyone, anywhere by which a person may be saved but through who? Verse 11 — Jesus.

Now many Christians are embarrassed by that and typically here's how it happens. They encounter people that they love and they cannot bring themselves to bear the thought that those people that they love who are without Christ could be lost and they don't want them to be offended. Two stories. Susan Strouse is an ordained minister and she is the head of an inter-faith ministry in San Francisco. And in her testimony about a year ago she tells the story of how she moved from traditional Christianity to what she calls a more progressive inter-faith view of Christianity and she says, "Here's how it started: I was at a funeral of a friend in an Episcopal church. I was sitting next to my very best friend who is Jewish and as the priest read John 14:6, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life,' for the first time in my life I heard those words through the ears of my Jewish friend, my best friend sitting next to me, and I knew then that I had to change my belief." In other words, she was offended for her friend by what Jesus said and she chose to believe something that was more comfortable for her experience even though it was in contradiction of what Jesus said. And so she actually went through a process of trying to show that the Bible speaks with an uncertain sound on this issue. But notice how it happened. It happened out of friendship. It didn't flow out of a deep Bible study that led her to say, "Well, you know I've been studying the Bible for five years now and I just can't believe that Jesus is the only way of salvation anymore." No, it happened when she realized that what Jesus said was offensive to a friend and she decided to change what she believed.

Now another story. A minister who grew up in a Christian home recently told his congregation that he could no longer believe that Jesus was the only way of salvation. Why? Because he said as he grew up, and I think I'll just quote here so I don't get these words wrong. As he grew up he "came to know people of other faiths, people in whom the Spirit of God was beautifully, powerfully, undeniably present and then I had myself a big problem." He could no longer believe in the exclusive claims of Christ as the only way of salvation. In fact, he tells the story of going to the bar mitzvah of the child of a friend and he said, "I could not go to that bar mitzvah and come away thinking that my friends were outside the pale of God's saving love and so I simply had to reject that part of my belief." But notice what's happening there. The belief is being shaped by the experience, by the relationship, by the social setting, not by the Bible. Now he too attempts to try and provide evidence that the Bible speaks with an uncertain sound on this question. Sadly, that is an absolutely impossible feat. The Bible is crystal clear on this from beginning to end.

The way to answer this is not to try and mute what the Bible says, it is to humbly accept that Jesus teaches this and there is no possibility in the world that there is someone out there more loving than Jesus. You know, if you want to put your money on somebody that you think is more loving than Jesus, I'll pick Jesus. I'm sticking with Him. I'm going with Him. I don't think there is anybody more loving than Jesus. But the other problem with this, of course, is that it doesn't accept what the Bible says about all people. As wonderful as unbelievers are, what does

Paul say about all of us in Romans chapter 3 verse 10? All of us are sinners. "There is none righteous, no, not one." Not one. Even the most lovely unbeliever that you've ever met is a sinner in need of God's grace. And what does the Bible say about Jesus? He is God's only begotten Son. He's come into this world to do what? To bear our sins. Romans 5:10 — "At the right time, Jesus came" to do what? "To die for the ungodly." It's because we believe that everybody's problem is sin and that Jesus is the only solution, God's own Son who came into this world to die for that sin, that we receive the truth that Jesus is the only way of salvation. Jesus taught it, His apostles taught it, the Bible teaches it from beginning to end. We believe and proclaim it not out of hate but out of love, not out of arrogance but out of humility.

It's so important for Christians to understand this. This is important both for our witness and it is important so that our faith is not undermined. You live in a world that forever and ever, as long as you live, is going to challenge and question and generally not like your exclusive truth claims. But they're not your exclusive truth claims; they're Jesus'. All you're doing is hearing your Master and listening to Him and doing what He says. And when you hear Him and do Him - do what He says - there is no possibility that you will be unloving towards anyone. We ought to be more evident and tangible in our love for unbelievers than unbelievers. You know, one of the things that I say to this dear brother who grew up in a Christian home and then encountered nice unbelievers is, "We need to get out more if that's your experience! We need to have more relationships with pagans who we like and they need to see our love and we don't need to be shaken up by the fact that there are nice people out there that don't believe what Jesus says." That's why Jesus has us in the world — to bear witness to those things, not because we hate them but precisely because we love them.

Oh my friends, it's so important for us to have the foundation of our faith squarely laid, not on our experience, not on what the society accepts, but on the Bible and on Jesus. That's where we started singing, hymn 94, "How firm a foundation ye saints of the Lord, is laid for your faith in His excellent Word." And where are we going to end? "Christ Is Made the Sure Foundation." Our key in this area is that we want our minds to be the mind of Christ our Savior and we're going to sing that too at the end of the service. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, thank You for Your Word. Help us to faithfully believe what Jesus taught, to hear Him and then do what He tells us to do out of humility and love but with boldness and courage. In Jesus' name, amen.

Now take your hymnals in hand and turn with me to number 343, "Christ Is Made the Sure Foundation." Let's sing the first stanza.

After the benediction make sure to take out your bulletins and sing that stanza of "May the Mind of Christ." Receive now God's blessing. Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

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