

Trick Question: How many religions are there in the world? If you Google that question, you get a wide variety of answers. The first thing you see says there are roughly 4,200 religions in the world. Another source says there are 19 major world religions subdivided into 270 large religious groups. You can drill down into these statistics and learn that there are approximately 34,000 Christian denominations, and on and on it goes. However, I said that this is a trick question, and it is. How many religions are there in the world? There are exactly two. Religion Number One is the religion of Law. Religion Number Two is the religion of Grace. If you're not sure what I mean by that, it's OK. Stick with me. It really is incredibly important that you understand this distinction.

At least that's what the apostle Paul thought. Paul is writing this letter to the churches of Galatia, and after giving a fairly standard greeting, he comes out swinging. Again: "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed." Wow! What was going on there in Galatia? Well, it seems that teachers had shown up after Paul and company left, and started to suggest that the message Paul had taught was incomplete. So they were saying that to receive God's full blessing, to really be saved, you had to believe in Jesus plus observe certain Old Testament ceremonies. What's the problem with that? The problem is, as Paul contends pretty vehemently, at that point you no longer have gospel. You no longer have good news. Paul is contending for the religion of grace, because the religion of the law is, in fact, a curse.

So back to those distinctions. When you understand them, you'll understand why Paul was so upset. There are two religions in the world and the first one is the religion of Law. Simply put, the religion of Law is based on your performance. It might help to imagine a ladder reaching from earth to heaven. The religion of Law says: "See that ladder? In order to gain God's favor, achieve enlightenment, or "go to heaven," you must start climbing. You must climb with discipline and moral excellence. If you climb well, God may bless you, and don't perform well, there will be consequences. In the end, the benefits and rewards are based on what you do.

The religion of grace could not be more different. The religion of grace is not based on your performance, but Someone else's. There is a ladder reaching from earth to heaven in this one as well. However, the religion of Grace says: "See that ladder? As hard as you might try, you will never make it to the top. You don't have it in you. Knowing this, God Himself is going to come down that ladder, do all the stuff you

couldn't do, pay the penalty for your faults, and then put you on his back as he takes you up the ladder with him. In the end, the benefits and rewards are based on what God does.

Do you see? There is one religion of grace: and that is believing the good news of Jesus, the Son of God, who was born of the virgin Mary; suffered under Pontius Pilate; was crucified, died and was buried; descended into hell; the third day rising again and ascending into heaven. The religion of grace claims that Jesus not only did these things historically, but He did them for you—He came down the ladder to do what you could never do and then give you the benefits of his activity. The burden of the climb down and back up is all on Jesus! This makes the Christian faith absolutely unique. It's what enables us to say that there are only two religions in the world, because everything else; everything else, no matter what label you apply, is based on your performance. And the reason this matters so much is that a religious system that is based on your performance will ultimately crush you. Why? Because you can't live up to it. You'll always be wondering, am I doing enough? You'll find yourself taking on too much and doing things out of guilt because you're trying to justify your own existence. Worse yet, you may start to feel superior to other people because you're outperforming them. The religion of Law says, "You can redeem yourself, if you just work hard enough." But there's no love for God here. This is God as your boss.

That's why Paul makes such a big deal about the Galatian situation. These teachers who came in after Paul may have paid lip-service to the religion of grace, but by insisting on tacking on the religion of Law they put the burden back on the people. The message being sent was: Jesus did some great things, but you still have to climb the ladder. That's tragic. You know why, right? You had the message of Jesus, coming down the ladder to save us, but then it gets switched to the message that crushes the human spirit by turning the focus inward. Well, Paul wasn't having it. He knew that message was a curse and he went so far as to say that people who were promoting that message were under a curse. Strong words! But he's right. Grace plus Law is not the gospel. Either you climb the ladder to get God, or God climbs down the ladder to get you. Jesus coming down to do for us is the very essence of the good news message. Do you understand? This is what Jesus thinks of you! He came down here to throw his arms around you! You were worth it to Him! This is not God as your Boss. This is God as your Hero. You don't love a hero out of guilt or obligation. You love him because of who he is and what he has done for you. We don't have time to get into how you can work this good news into every area of your life, but I hope you can at least sense the potential of it to become a new foundation for you.

Now some people might hear this talk about two religions and think, "Wow, only two, huh? The gospel of Jesus and everything else—Isn't that kind of narrow-minded?" And that's a valid question. My response to such a question would be: Imagine that you are very sick; that it's not looking good for you at all. You go to the doctor and the doctor

makes her diagnosis and she says, “Look: I’m giving it to you straight. You are in serious condition and your death seems imminent. However, I’ve got this medicine that will reverse the effects of your disease, bring you full healing and will prolong your life. But this is the only medicine that will work.” What would you do? Would you refuse to take the medicine because it’s too narrow?

Jesus came down the ladder to offer his life for yours. Take this medicine and accept no substitutes.