

The Five Pillars of Effort (Islam)

Phil EuBank · Let's Be Honest · Psalm 130:3; Hebrews 13:8; Deuteronomy 6:4; John 1:1; John 14:6

AT A GLANCE

Islam and Christianity answer the same question — what is my standing before God? — with structurally opposite frameworks. Islam offers a clear five-pillar path of obedience whose eternal outcome remains uncertain even for the devout. Christianity replaces the performance-based report card with a birth certificate: an identity received, not achieved, secured entirely by the work of Jesus.

- Islam's five pillars offer enviable clarity about what God requires, but no certainty about whether lifelong obedience will be enough.
- The scales paradigm is not uniquely Islamic — many Christians functionally live under the same earn-your-standing anxiety without naming it.
- Jesus does not offer a better checklist; he offers a permanent identity: his perfect record exchanged for yours, given by grace.

“Jesus actually takes your failing report card and trades it for his perfect and permanent report card.”

EXPOSITION

Scripture engaged

[Psalm 130:3](#) — If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?

[Hebrews 13:8](#) — Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

[Deuteronomy 6:4](#) — Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.

[John 1:1](#) — In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

[John 14:6](#) — I am the way, the truth, the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

The argument

Islam's Five Pillars Offer Clarity Without Certainty — The report card is legible; the final grade is not

The preacher presents Islam's five pillars — shahada (confession of faith), salah (five daily prayers), zakat (mandatory almsgiving), sawm (Ramadan fasting), and hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca) — as obligations, not suggestions. The system's strength is transparency: 'You know what's expected. You know what you are going to get graded on.' But this clarity carries an irresolvable tension. On the Day of Judgment, good deeds and bad deeds go on a scale; paradise awaits if good outweighs bad, judgment if it does not. The catch is that no Muslim — not even Muhammad, who in his own writings expressed uncertainty about his standing — knows in advance how the scales will tip. Devout lifelong obedience earns no guarantee. The report card is being kept; no one can read it until it is too late to revise it.

Insight — A system can be perfectly clear about what God requires and still leave the obedient person in perpetual uncertainty about whether they have done enough.

The Scales Anxiety Is a Human Condition, Not an Islamic One — Many Christians operate under an Islamic framework without knowing it

Before critiquing Islam's earn-your-standing structure, the preacher turns the lens inward. He observes that many self-identified Christians functionally live under the same paradigm: 'Do my good works outweigh my bad works in my life? I hope so.' He names this bluntly: 'You're keeping score. You're wondering if you're enough. You're just doing it within a Christian framework rather than in an Islamic one.' Psalm 130:3 surfaces this as a universal human problem — 'If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?' — with the Psalmist's implicit answer being no one. The preacher's move here is disarming: it levels the ground between traditions so that the difference he is about to draw lands as good news rather than tribal point-scoring.

Insight — Before the gospel can land as good news, the listener must first recognize that performance-based standing before God is their own default posture, not merely someone else's religion.

Progressive Revelation Versus a Stable Christological Canon — The interpretive framework you bring to Scripture determines what you find there

The preacher identifies the structural reason Islam and Christianity read the same texts so differently: Islam's doctrine of progressive revelation holds that God refines and corrects earlier scriptures with each new disclosure, making the Quran — delivered last, therefore most accurate — the final override of Torah, Prophets, and Gospel. The Bible, in the Islamic view, has been corrupted. Christians read the opposite direction: the Old Testament anticipates Jesus, the New Testament announces his arrival, and Hebrews 13:8's claim that 'Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever' means the canon is unified rather than superseded. The preacher's grammatical observation about Deuteronomy 6:4 — that the Hebrew uses three

distinct words for God in a single sentence, rendering strict singular monotheism syntactically awkward — illustrates how presuppositions about revelation shape what any given passage is allowed to mean.

Insight — The dispute between Islam and Christianity is not finally about which texts to trust but about what interpretive authority — progressive correction or Christological unity — governs how any text is read.

Jesus as the Way Is a Person, Not a Protocol — The report-card paradigm breaks only if Jesus is who he claimed to be

The sermon's pivot turns on John 14:6: 'I am the way, the truth, the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.' The preacher emphasizes the definite article — not a way, the way — and notes that Jesus is not presenting a manual or a checklist but a person. Muslims revere Jesus as sinless and as a prophet; what they reject is his divinity and resurrection — 'the very means by which you and I believe that he saves.' Those two rejections are not incidental: they are precisely the points that would change the paradigm. If Jesus is merely a prophet, the report card still stands. If Jesus is God incarnate who died and rose again, then someone who has already lived the life we cannot has already satisfied the judgment we cannot. 'Christianity, its central truth claim, is that it is the most inclusive, exclusive faith in the world. It's the only way, and it's available to everyone, every day.'

Insight — The exclusivity of Christ is only oppressive if salvation is in principle achievable by human effort; if no one can stand before a holy God on their own record, the only door being the one that is always open is mercy, not cruelty.

The Birth Certificate Replaces the Report Card — Identity received by grace produces a different kind of obedience than identity earned by performance

The sermon's closing argument uses the birth-certificate metaphor to name what the gospel actually does. A birth certificate does not evaluate performance; it declares origin. You did not earn the family name on it. The preacher extends this: becoming a child of God happens 'when you acknowledge your inability to perform well enough for a holy God and that in his love for you Jesus offers his righteousness in your place.' The stakes of obedience then change entirely — not earning a place you do not yet have, but living from a place already secured. He frames the confidence this produces not as arrogance but as the logic of grace: 'If you understand the gospel the answer is ten. It could never be below ten because it isn't based on you. It's based on him.' Submission still happens, but its motive is gratitude within a family rather than anxiety before a judge.

Insight — When standing before God is settled by adoption rather than accumulation, obedience becomes an expression of identity rather than a bid for acceptance.

Cross-references

- [Psalm 130:3](#) — Anchor text establishing that no one could survive a purely merit-based divine reckoning — the Psalmist's own acknowledgment that the scales would condemn everyone
- [Hebrews 13:8](#) — Grounds the Christian reading strategy: because Jesus is unchanging across time, the Old and New Testaments form a unified canon rather than a correctable sequence
- [Deuteronomy 6:4](#) — Site of exegetical tension — the preacher notes the Hebrew uses three distinct words for God, arguing the Shema implies rather than forecloses Trinitarian monotheism
- [John 1:1](#) — Passage Muslims cite as evidence of biblical corruption; the preacher treats it as a clear Trinitarian affirmation consistent throughout Scripture
- [John 14:6](#) — Core Christological claim distinguishing Christianity from Islam: Jesus presents himself as the singular personal path to the Father, not a system of requirements

DEVOTIONAL

There is a particular kind of exhaustion that comes from not knowing whether you have done enough. It is the exhaustion of the student who studies through the night and still cannot be sure. It is the exhaustion of the child who waits by the mailbox, hoping to intercept the report card before anyone else can read the verdict already written on it. It is a weariness that has nothing to do with laziness and everything to do with the unbridgeable gap between a finite effort and an infinite standard. Islam does not create this weariness — it names a weariness that belongs to the whole human race. The Psalmist felt it centuries before Muhammad was born: if you kept a record, Lord, who could stand? The answer hangs in the silence after the question. No one. Not the devoted, not the disciplined, not even the prophet. What the gospel offers is not a more efficient method for closing that gap. It is the announcement that the gap has already been closed — not from our side, but from his. Jesus does not hand you a better checklist. He holds out a birth certificate. It does not record what you have done. It declares whose you are. This changes the posture of obedience entirely. When you are no longer performing to earn a place in the family, you are free to live from within it. Submission stops being the anxious labor of someone auditing their own soul and becomes the natural movement of someone who knows they are loved. The scales are still real. The standard is still holy. But someone else has already stood on them in your place, and the verdict on his record is the one that counts for you. The question worth sitting with today is not whether you have done enough. It is whether you have received what has already been done.

Reflection

- In what areas of your life are you quietly operating under a report-card framework — measuring your standing before God by the balance of your recent obedience and failure — and what would it feel like to release that accounting to Jesus?
- When you think about the devout Muslim neighbor or coworker the preacher described — someone striving with full sincerity, carrying real weight, genuinely uncertain whether it will ever be enough — what does that stir in you, and how might it reshape the way you enter a conversation about faith with them?
- If your confidence that you would enter eternity with God is anything less than a ten, what is the gap based on — and what would it mean for your daily life if that number were secured entirely by Christ's record rather than your own?

Closing prayer

God, thank you that your love really is infinite — that anyone, anywhere, at any time can turn to you and be adopted as a son or daughter of the King. Today, would someone hear that good news and say yes to you in the truest place of who they are? We live in a divisive world. There is fear between people who should be neighbors. But perfect love casts out fear, so let that perfect love flow — making us ambassadors of peace for a world that desperately needs it. Thank you for the love given through your Son, the power available in your Spirit, and the perfect love of a Father who saw us run the other way and gave chase. We give all of this to you and trust you with it. In Jesus' name, amen.