

Sermon One: Jesus Alone Claims to be the Way, the Truth and the Life

On Good Friday, I stopped to get gas at the station over by the Safeway. As I was paying the attendant we had a bit of a conversation about where I was going and what I would be doing at church. After a minute of telling him about the Good Friday Service he told me that he was a Sikh. He had not been to a temple for about a year and wasn't devout in his religious practice. He then said that the way he looks at it, all religions are the same and all spiritual roads lead to the same place.

We didn't have time to talk more because it was close to service time and I had to leave. But since that brief conversation I have been thinking about his comment. It is one that is representative of how many people live. It is a common belief today that all cultures and religions are equally valid in their basic teaching and no one religion is more apt in being able to answer life's most important questions than another. This is one of the core beliefs of multi-culturalism.

Jesus lived in a society that had a similar attitude. In the Greco-Roman world it is said, that to the popular mind all religions were considered equally true, to the philosophers, they were equally false, and to the magistrates, they were equally useful. Jesus both then and today speaks a word that a multi-cultural society finds difficult to accept or understand. In John 14 he says "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. 7 If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him." Here Jesus is making a staggering claim that contradicts the point of view of the gas attendant on Good Friday. Jesus says that the only way to truly know God is by knowing Him. The more we know Jesus he says the more we will know the Father.

The question we have to therefore ask ourselves is who is right. The man who says "all religions are the same and lead ultimately to God?" or Jesus who says: "I am the Road, also the Truth, also the Life. No one gets to the Father apart from me." Both these statements cannot be right. The reality is that if religion is to be treated with intellectual respect, it must stand the test of truth. Over the next five or six weeks I want to present the case that it is Jesus who is right. By discussing the uniqueness of Jesus Christ I intend to show that he answers life's most important questions in a way that no other religious thinker can even come near to matching. In doing this I hope we will come to better understand the uniqueness of the Christian message and so be able to better know how to give a defence of this position in a culture that says all religions are equally valid and equally true.

To engage in thinking deeply about the uniqueness of Jesus is important because we as Christians are easily lulled into agreeing with the gas attendant. For you see the Spirit of the age says that we can believe anything today so long as you do not claim it to be true. Morally, we can practice anything, so long as you do not claim it is a "better" way. Religiously, you can hold to anything, so long as you do not bring Jesus Christ into it. Why is there such a mood present today?

In part it is because the church has too often conveyed the uniqueness of Jesus in a way that was authoritarian and so contrary to the character Jesus. Jesus said that his kingdom is not of this world but of the heart and that his followers were not to use the sword to persuade others to become his followers. But throughout the last two thousand years the church has at times incorporated methods so contrary to the character of Jesus and have in fact been methods inspired by the devil of hell rather than by the Holy Spirit. People think immediately of the Crusades and then assume that if this is the only way to convey the uniqueness of Jesus, let's not risk it and keep well enough alone. And yet it need not be so.

Christians are to show the utmost respect for all people regardless of who they are and what they believe. The way in which we share the uniqueness of Jesus as we come to better understand how he is different from all other so called gods is best described by Peter in his first letter in chapter 3:15 "in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; 16 yet do it with gentleness and reverence." Peter is saying two things in these verses. To say that in "our hearts we sanctify Christ as Lord" he means that we accept his uniqueness and live out our lives in relation to this. Part of what we will look at over the next month is how we are to do this. Secondly Peter is saying that when people ask us about why we think Jesus is unique we are able to make a defence before them, but this is to be done with gentleness and reverence. In other words we are to be able to defend the claim that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life but in such a way that we show the utmost courtesy to those with whom we are speaking.

Notice also that he says we are to make a defence to anyone who demands from us an accounting for the hope that is within us. It is an interesting choice of verbs. We are to defend what we believe from those who demand an accounting. This suggests that the one asking the question may be hostile. This was indeed the case in the context when Peter lived. He and the other apostles ultimately defended the gospel by laying down their lives. But why would people be hostile towards the message of the Gospel? I think it is because the early Christians continued to proclaim the message that Jesus did. He is unique and in a society that said all religions are equal, such a

claim would rise the ire of many.

So be it as Christians living in the first century or as Christians living in the twenty-first century to sanctify Jesus in our hearts and to give a defense can be challenging indeed. This is because the Spirit of this age has led people to say that what is truth for you, may not be for me. But truth is truth. $2 \times 2 = 4$, not 5. If I owe the government \$1000.00 on Tuesday, they will not be pleased if I include a cheque for only \$10.00. The truth is I owe them another \$990.00 and they will keep contacting me until they get the rest of the outstanding tax. It will not do for me to say to the tax man that it may be true to you that I owe another \$990.00 but it isn't true for me so you must be satisfied with my \$10.00. And yet when it comes to spiritual and moral truth we no longer hold to this line of thinking. Let me cite two examples.

One of India's leading "saints" Sri Ramakrishna, is said to have been for a little while a Muslim, for a little while a Christian, and then finally, Hindu again, because he came to the conclusion that they are all the same. If they are all the same, why did he revert to Hinduism?

Biblical Christianity expresses very clearly that no one ought to be compelled to become a Christian. This sets the Christian faith drastically apart from Islam. In no country where Christianity is the faith of the majority is it illegal to propagate another faith. There is no country in the world that I know where the renunciation of one's Christian faith puts one in danger of being hunted down by the powers of state. Yet, there are numerous Islamic countries where it is against the law to publicly proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ and where a Muslim who renounces his or her belief in Islam to believe something else risks death. Freedom to critique the text of the Koran and the person of Mohammed are prohibited by laws of blasphemy. You see to compel belief in Jesus Christ is foreign to the gospel and that is a vital difference. These two examples begin to highlight that it is not true to say that all religions are the same.

For the rest of this morning we are going to look at the basic tenants of Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. As we do so notice that they say things that are in complete contradiction to the teaching of Jesus. Just as an equation has a right and wrong answer, how much more so when it comes to ultimate questions like the nature of God, life's meaning, suffering, and what it means to live a bodily existence? Not all spiritual teaching can be true.

Hinduism

Hinduism is a varied system of religion, philosophy, and cultural practices born in

India. Hindus share a core belief in reincarnation and a supreme being of many forms and natures.

- Hinduism dates to 1500 b.c. as a system of ritual and multiple gods (polytheism).
- Shiva, Vishnu, Kali or Ganesh are among the most popular deities, but they also worship countless millions of additional minor gods tied to a particular village or family.
- Hinduism is a very complex system where popular practice and philosophical theory do not always meet. Systemizing it is almost impossible.
- Hinduism holds that opposing religious theories are aspects of one eternal truth.
- The goal of Hinduism is to achieve Moksha or Nirvana, a release from rebirths and a merging with the Oneness of the universe.
- Hinduism holds that human life is a cycle of reincarnation. Rebirth can be in human or animal form.
- To Hindus, the circumstances of the new birth are determined by the good and evil of past actions -- the Law of Karma.
- The self is ultimately divinized in Hinduism.
- The focus is more one a way of life than on a doctrine of belief. That is why it is sometimes hard to differentiate between religion and culture.
- The earliest and primary Hindu scriptures are known as the "Vedas." There are other writings placed in various categories of authority.
- The vast majority of the world's 750 million Hindus live in India.

Buddhism

Buddhism is a religion of great variation, yet its central teachings are that suffering is an inherent part of life and that liberation from suffering comes from moral and mental self-purification.

- Buddhism grew out of the teachings of Siddhartha Guatama (563-483 b.c.), who later became known as Buddha, "the enlightened one."
- Buddha left Hinduism because he could not accept the final authority of the Vedas or subscribe to the cast system.
- Buddha is revered not as God but as a spiritual master who points the way to enlightenment.
- At the core of Buddha's teaching are four basic or "noble" truths:
 1. life is suffering,
 2. the cause of suffering is desire,
 3. suffering can be ended by getting rid of desire, and
 4. freedom from desire is achieved via an eightfold path of right views, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right-mindedness, and right contemplation.
- The goal of Buddhism is to be freed from the cycle of death and rebirth.

- A Buddhist who ceases to desire is "Enlightened" and achieves the state of Nirvana, an abstract nothingness.
- There is no real self in Buddhism.
- Buddhism, strongest in eastern and central Asia, has some three hundred million adherents.
- Buddhism is uncertain about the existence of a personal God.

Islam

Islam teaches that there is one God, Allah. It focuses on submission to God and acceptance of Mohammed as the chief and last prophet of God.

- Islam was founded in Arabia by Mohammed (c. a.d. 570-632). A person who practices Islam is known as a Muslim.
- Islam takes its name from the Arabic word for "devout submission to the will of God."
- Muslims accept their scriptures, the Koran, as the speech of God to Mohammed, and they believe that God Himself is the author.
- Muslims observe the five "pillars" of Islam:
 1. the declaration of faith,
 2. prayer,
 3. fasting,
 4. giving alms, and
 5. a pilgrimage to Mecca.
- Islam has more than one billion adherents from Africa to the Middle East and parts of Asia Europe and North America.
- Many predominantly Muslim nations have closed their borders to Christian missionaries or made evangelism illegal.
- Islam sees Jesus as one of the major prophets, but to call Jesus God's Son is blasphemous. It accepts as genuine some of the miracles of Jesus, including the virgin birth, and even His power to raise the dead.