

Text: Matthew 2:1-12

Title: "Truth or Consequences: Part II"

Introduction: Last week we started a new series called, "World Religions and the Gospel Truth". Why? Why would we use up valuable time in a Christian church to talk about other people's religious beliefs? Why would we want to compare our religious beliefs with other people's religious beliefs?

Why do we care? Because our Bibles tell us that our privilege and our job as servants of Jesus Christ is to "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit." And to "teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you (Matt. 28:19-20a)." That includes people who practice their faith in different ways than we do!!

In order for us to do that well and not just irritate, annoy and generally put off people of other religions because of our insensitivity and brassiness, we need to learn what other people believe and why. Only then can we understand how to approach them relationally and in a way that is Christ-like. Only then will we have any chance to invite them to get to know Jesus Christ.

I also feel that a study of what other people believe helps us solidify an understanding of what we, as Christians, believe. This will only help us to be able to verbalize our knowledge and experience of the Christian faith. *Wow! Growing in our faith is part of the goal of this series ... Can you believe it!?!?*

Any discussion about World Religions brings up a whole bunch of questions. Maybe there are some questions you would like to ask, but have never had the chance ... *or were scared to?! Well, here is our chance to get some questions about religion answered.*

At this time, I invite you to take the blue insert out of your program. On one side you will find our scripture for today and on the other you will find an outline of where we were last week, as well as where we are going this week. My hope is that you will hear something today that will help you or someone you know in your faith journey.

Now, before we go any further, let me remind you that this series is going to be a preliminary to World Religions 101. There is no way I can go as deep into all the beliefs of each of the religions we will be talking about as I would like to. There just isn't enough time. I encourage you all to do further study as your interest takes you there. I do believe that if we truly study the other religious beliefs of the world, it will strengthen our belief in Jesus Christ as Lord and God's only Son.

Last week we began our series by answering the first two questions about World Religions. All of my notes and the audio for last week's message are on our website. Let's start with our two questions from last week...

Questions:

- I. #1 = "Why Are There So Many Different Religions?"
 - A. ***Does God Really Exist?***

1. Some people look at the incredible number of different religions and think that is a reason to believe that there is no God. Why? Because if there was a God surely this God would make clear to people the one right path, right?!?
2. Some people look at the multiple religions as reason to believe that God and religion is a human invention.
3. I think a little bit differently. There has to be some reality when people, who are not connected in any way, have similar desires and thoughts and experiences.
 - a. No matter where in the world you live, when a loved one dies, people have believed that there must be something beyond life here on earth.
 - b. It doesn't matter whether you live in Wisconsin or the West Indies, when we see something beautiful in creation, something inside of us wants to praise the Maker.
 - c. When one spends time alone in prayer ... doesn't matter whether one is Buddhist, Jew, and Muslim or Christian, there is a sense of peace in our whole being.
4. I believe that these common experiences point to the reality of God.

B. *We See Things Differently*

1. Now, Religion aside, we, as humans, often see the same thing differently.
 - a. Ever heard of having different witnesses in a trial and they all saw the accident that happened a little bit differently?
 - b. Ever gone to a movie with spouse or friends and while talking about the movie, you can't help but wonder if they were in the same movie as you?
2. Why are we surprised when human beings in different parts of the world come up with different solutions for what they need spiritually?
3. As I think about who God is, I believe that God is so far beyond our comprehension that there is no way our thoughts, our words, our music or our art work could possibly capture what God looks like or any depth to who God really is.
 - a. Paul wrote well in I Cor. 13:9, 12, "We know only a little ... Now we see things imperfectly, as if in a poor mirror..."
 - b. The greatness of God compared to the smallness of our human minds does not add up well for us to say we have God figured out.
 - c. I believe that when we actually see God face-to-face, we might be more than a little bit surprised.

C. *How God Allows Us to Learn*

1. I think that when we talk about religious differences, it has to do, in part, with how God allows us to learn...
2. In some ways, it's kind of like our kids learning patterns.
3. As a parent, I understand that. While working on homework, our daughters will often ask Sarah and/or me how to spell a word.
 - a. My initial reaction is to just spell it, so they will leave me alone ... or so that I will look smart to them.
 - b. Then I realize that me just answering is not going to help my daughter learn. Instead, I start giving them hints ... "how do you think it's spelled?" ... "Sound it out...", "Where's the dictionary?", etc.
 - c. What I'm doing is helping my daughter not just know it and write it down, but how to learn and teach herself some of the things she will need to know in life. It also means she might make some mistakes along the way.
4. I think God deals with us in similar ways. About 3800 years ago, most humans were 'polytheists' (more than one God) and people believed that different gods did different things ... some created, some interacted, some brought justice, some healed, some did other miracles.
 - a. Well, around that time, God decided to give Abraham a little hint (like I give my daughters).
 - b. We call these hints, "special revelation". These are ways that God used to help guide humans in their quest to know God.
5. About 600 years later, God gave another hint. This one was for Moses. God took Moses up a mountain and said, "Moses, I have a plan for humanity." God gave Moses the 10 Commandments and a bunch of other laws and said, "Moses, go back and teach My people these things, so they know without a shadow of doubt what is right and what is wrong."
6. Then there were more hints through the O.T. Prophets.
7. Finally, God revealed God's self like never before when God sent Jesus the Son. Our knowing Jesus Christ gives us a true look at Who God is and what God expects of us!
 - a. This is the measure we Christians use to judge all else in this world.
 - b. As we look at other religions, Jesus Christ will be what we truly compare with whatever the other World Religions say.

So, those are some reasons why there are so many different religions...

II. #2 = “How Should Christians View Other Religions?”

A. ***Five Major Religions***

1. First, let’s talk about the Five Major Religions that we will be addressing during this worship series. Let’s start with some numbers, considering we have approximately 6 billion people in the world...
 - a. 2 Billion (About 1/3) are Christians.
 - b. 1.3 Billion Muslim (1/5 of world population).
 - c. 900 Million Hindus
 - d. 360 Million Buddhists
 - e. Judaism = approximately 14 Million
 - f. Total for these 5 religions = 4.5 Billion ... more than 2/3 of the world population.
2. In the U.S., 77% of the population claim to be Christian and 15% have no religious claims.
 - a. 1.3% of U.S. populations = Judaism
 - b. .5% is Muslim, .5% is Buddhist, .5% is Hindu
3. BUT, over the past 10-12 years, here are the U.S. growth percentages...
 - a. Christianity = 5%
 - b. Islam/Muslim = 110%
 - c. Buddhism = 170%
 - d. Hinduism = 237%
4. Why am I telling you this? 2/3 of the world’s population is not Christian. So, perhaps billions of people are living lives faithful to their beliefs about their god or gods.

B. ***#1 = The Pluralist Perspective***

1. The Pluralist Perspective is considered a contemporary/post-modern approach to religious beliefs. A Pluralist would say, “All religions are separate but equal paths to God/Ultimate Reality.”
2. Two reasons to struggle with this perspective or at least look at it more seriously...
 - a. 1st = I don’t think that this view really honors the belief systems we are talking about. Most Muslims would probably not feel good about or honored by hearing that their faith is different but equal to the Hindu faith. They would feel that you obviously did not understand their faith then. If we understood, we would not believe that Islam and Hinduism were “equally valid paths to Ultimate Reality.”
 - b. 2nd = It does not take the time to look carefully at the different beliefs and set levels of logic and validity. “I’m okay; you’re okay” does not take time to understand which is closer to the truth than others.

- c. I like being fair and respecting other people's beliefs, but I don't think pluralism is fair to anyone ... self included.

C. #2 = *The Exclusivist Perspective*

1. The Christian that subscribes to the Exclusivist Perspective, might say, "Anyone who does not accept Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord will be condemned to hell." It does not matter if one is devout in their faith, if it's not Christianity, it doesn't matter...
2. A more forgiving Exclusivist might say that if people have not had a chance to hear about Jesus Christ, then God will judge them according to what they could know.
3. Yes, Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6) But, He also said that he came to seek out and save the lost ... don't forget the thief on the cross next to Jesus ... think GRACE.

D. #3 = *The Inclusivist Perspective*

1. This perspective believes that God is everywhere and at work among all people even if they have not heard the Good News of Jesus Christ.
2. The Inclusivist Christian believes that Jesus is the ultimate revelation of God: God in person. They believe that Jesus life, death and resurrection are the good news for all people!
3. The Inclusivist also believes that God may be involved with non-Christians too (Wesley called this PREVENIENT GRACE). Maybe God works through other religious beliefs and gives those people hints as to Who God is, just like us.
4. Maybe God sees what's in peoples hearts and how they conduct themselves and how they attempt to serve God in their lives, whether they've heard the name of Jesus or not. Maybe that service is a demonstration of the faith they do have.

The idea that God has mercy and love for people who are outside of the Christian Faith ... God's willingness to speak to them in religious terms that they understand right now is what I see from our Scripture ...

Our Scripture for today comes from Matthew 2. It's Matthew's version of Jesus birth and the events surrounding it.

READ MATTHEW 2:1-12 NOW AND PRAY!

III. #3 = "How Is God at Work in Other Religions?"

A. *The Wise Guys ... a Biblical Way to Start*

1. In the Christian Church we celebrate the coming of the Wise Men every year in January and we call it Epiphany. “Epiphany” means manifestation and we talk about this being the manifestation or appearance of Jesus for who He really is ... a Savior for the Jews and Gentiles.
2. So, who were these “wise men”? Often we think of the wise men as kings, but chances are they were representatives or ambassadors for kings.
 - a. Many believe that these men would have been “*magi*”, which could mean magicians or wise men/counselors. BUT, in the East, the word was used *primarily* in reference to Zoroastrian priests of the Persian Empire.
 - b. Yes, they could have been from Arabia or Mesopotamia, etc., but for the sake of argument, let’s go with the PRIMARY USE of the word “Magi”.
3. Zoroastrianism is a faith that shares many things in common with the Jewish faith of the day ... one God, a belief in a devil, angels and demons, etc. They also had many beliefs contradictory to the Jewish faith.
4. These priests were astrologers; they looked for signs from God in the stars ... now, whether they were from Arabia or Mesopotamia or Persia or if they were Zoroastrian or otherwise, they did not learn trying to find God in the configuration of stars from the Jewish faith!
5. Regardless, imagine what their procession would have looked like ... it would have been more than three people on camels ... ambassadors traveling through different countries would have had a caravan—many camels, beautiful robes and turbans and carrying expensive gifts ... it was enough to gain a lot of attention in Jerusalem!
6. Just don’t miss the main idea of this story. These were people who looked to the stars to foretell the future. Nowhere in Judaism are people called to follow stars. These people had a different god!
 - a. But, God spoke to them in their own language / religion.
 - b. God showed up in a way that they, through their beliefs could understand.
 - c. Their response? Left home for weeks if not months.
 - d. When they met Jesus they bowed before Him!
 - e. They were not Jews expecting the Messiah ... as the Jews had prophesied and expected for years, but they were “filled with joy.”
7. At Epiphany, we remember that Jesus reaches out to ALL people, regardless of their background.

8. These people did not know Moses Law, or the prophecies about Jesus as the coming Messiah and Savior, but God invited them to be some of the first to meet God in the human form.
9. Wise people who seek God, no matter what religious background they have, will feel joy when they find the truth ... when they see God in a new way.
10. God honored their faithfulness and knew that they would respond to their “starry” invitation to come and see the King of kings and Lord of lords. You see...

B. *God's Not As Small As We Suppose*

1. I believe in One God and in God's only Son, Jesus Christ, Our Lord. I believe that Jesus' life, death and resurrection reveals to us who God really is. I believe that Jesus Christ is the Messiah and Savior and that one day He will return to judge the living and the dead. I believe that Jesus bought our forgiveness and salvation through His death on the cross.
2. BUT, God also spoke to Zoroastrian priests and invited THEM to come see Jesus the Christ by lining up Jupiter and Saturn in just the right manner.
 - a. Same God who sent Jonah to Nineveh (wicked, mean people of the Assyrian Empire).
 - b. Same God who showed compassion to Hagar and Ishmael (Abraham's second wife and son) and promised that Ishmael would become a great nation (Muslims and Arabs lay claim to this!).
 - c. Same God who led Paul to address the Athenians about their “unknown god” and introduce him as Jesus the Christ.

IV. #4 = “What Is the Fate of Those Who Earnestly Pursue God Through Other Religions?”

My Honest Answer: I don't know. Theologians have thought, discussed and written about the possibilities for centuries before you and me. Let's look at some possibilities...

A. *An Understanding of Biblical Grace*

1. The story of Jonah and Nineveh. Nineveh believed in different gods and they were wicked people. God sent Jonah to teach and then spared the lives of the people.
2. Hagar, Abraham's concubine, crying in the wilderness for some sort of mercy for her and her son, Ishmael ... God spared them and made a great nation of Ishmael (Muslims/Arabs).
3. Zoroastrian priests getting invited to meet Jesus as a young child...
4. God's GRACE = God's Riches At Christ's Expense ... is this for everybody?

B. “No One Comes to the Father except by Me.”

1. Which brings us back to; “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6)
2. How do we understand this verse? Does this mean only those who claim Christianity will enter heaven?
 - a. Many believe that this means only those who make a conscious choice to follow Jesus Christ on this earth. Otherwise, he or she will be condemned to hell. Amen?
 - b. Maybe this isn't the only interpretation of John 14:6. Let me try a couple more...
 - c. 1st = Maybe Jesus is just saying matter-of-factly, “When it comes to heaven and eternal life, you'll have to go through me first ... the Father and I are one!” No way around it, Jesus will be there on Judgment Day.
 - d. 2nd = Jesus death and His killing off the sins of humanity were for ALL of humanity. We talk about in Christianity that the price is paid ... it's done ... it is a gift placed before us! So, the price is paid and God gets to choose who God will give that gift to.
 - e. Is it possible that this gift could be given to a faithful Hindu if God so chooses? Remembering that it's only possible because of Jesus dying for ALL sins on that cross...
 - f. Remember Philippians 2:10-11, “...at the name of Jesus, every knee will bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” Christian or not!

C. Got a Problem with That?

1. Now, for those of you here that are struggling like crazy with the thought of God allowing a person into heaven without consciously and in front of a church confessing Jesus as their Lord and Savior ... for those of you (and me) who've got a problem with that...
2. What about those *children who die in infancy* who were not born to Christian parents who thought it wise to have their babies baptized? *Most Christians say that they can be granted salvation because God, in His mercy, gives the gift paid for by Jesus on the cross.*
3. What about those who are *severely mentally handicapped* who will never be able to, as it says in Romans 10, “confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord” because “it is by

confessing with your mouth that you are saved.”? I’m not sure many can even understand what it means that God raised Jesus from the dead... What about them? No room in heaven for them?

D. Then, Why Preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ?

1. Now, we’ve really created a problem. If it’s possible for anyone to get into heaven even if they don’t know to confess Jesus as their Lord and Savior ... **WHY PREACH THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST?** If God might show God’s mercy on people of other religious beliefs, why are we even bothering to learn this stuff?!? **WHY PREACH THE GOOD NEWS OF JESUS CHRIST?**
2. Four answers:
 - a. #1 = We offer people of other religions Jesus Christ because we believe that God presented God’s self to humanity in the form of Jesus Christ ... that’s different from other religions.
 - b. #2 = We tell them about Jesus Christ because Jesus is “the way, the truth and the life.” Why take chances on not telling them?
 - c. #3 = We share the story of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior because it offers people the most complete picture of Who God is and in following Him, we know what the Joy of salvation is! We get to start experiencing God’s paradise *before* we leave this earth!
 - d. #4 = Finally, we offer people of other religions, including those who want nothing to do with religion, Jesus Christ, because Jesus Christ commanded us to do it! “Go!”

With this perspective, we will hopefully not use the “turn or burn” tactics that turn more people away from God than toward God. Hopefully we will be able to say to people of other beliefs, “I believe that God loves you and is honored by your desire to serve God. May I share with you what the Christian faith believes about the God you love?” Then we can share our experiences and understanding of the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Next week = Hinduism, Better Luck Next Time, an Early 90s Grunge Band and a Christian Response.

Let’s Pray!

I would like to thank Rev. Adam Hamilton and his staff for the sermon series and book on World Religions; *Christianity and World Religions*. I am using this book as my main source of outline and information for this sermon series.