

I. Scripture

- A. *"Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."* (Acts 4:12)
- B. *"Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.'" (John 14:6)*
- C. That claim is either the most arrogant statement ever uttered, or it is the most important. Across every culture, every continent, every century—only one name. One direction. One way home.
- D. Before we're done today, we'll meet a king who married the world and tried their gods. A thousand voices. A thousand altars. And we'll hear what he said when the noise finally quieted.
- E. For eleven weeks we've asked: What does Jesus offer that no one else has offered and nothing else can? Today we bring that question to three world religions—and we let each one finish a story Jesus Himself told: the Parable of the Prodigal Son.
- F. You might know the story. A young man demands his inheritance, runs away from his Father, and wastes everything on wild, crazy, out of bounds living. He ends up broken, starving in a pigpen, and desperate to go home.
- G. When he finally turns back, Jesus tells us this happens:
 1. *"And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him."* (Luke 15:20)
- H. And then there's a feast and a celebration and prime beef on the spit.
 1. And by the way, if you find yourself far from your father today... I promise you that if you come back to him, he will receive you and embrace you and celebrate you in the exact same way... no matter what you've done.
 2. I know this might go against all your instincts... it might go against all your religious training. But that's the power of this amazing force called grace.
- I. I'm using this parable as the ultimate litmus test.
- J. We owe it to ourselves to ask a critical question: How would other world religions finish this parable?
 1. Because the parable gets radically different endings, depending on who is telling it.
 1. If you hand this pen to a Buddhist, a Hindu, or a Muslim, they will write completely different endings. And the difference is not a small theological detail. The difference means everything.

II. Series

- A. Welcome to part 12 in our series called **What's the Difference.**
- B. Today, our topic is **Three World Religions**
- C. We're going to look at Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam.
- D. Now, let's take a look at how the 3 great world religions would end the parable of the Prodigal Son.

III. Buddhism

- A. Consider the Buddhist ending. Buddhism brings something incredibly real to this story.
- B. It started with a man named Siddhartha Gautama.
- C. He is called the Buddha—which isn't actually a first name. It's a title meaning "the Enlightened One."
- D. This Enlightened One looked at the human condition and exposed what most of us spend our lives running from...
 1. Pain is not an accident. It is structural.
- E. There's a pain that runs through everything, and he traced it to its root.
- F. For him, the root of all pain was ATTACHMENT. Craving. Desire.
 1. The desire to hold what cannot be held.
 2. The desire to be what we cannot permanently be.
 3. The desire to have anything at all.
 - a) Desire is the root problem. That includes attachment. That includes affection. That includes passion. That includes love. That's your problem.
 - b) Love anything at all and your heart will be broken and you will suffer.
 4. What wounds you most is the desire to not be wounded.
 5. What wounds you actually is any desire at all.
- G. So under Buddhism, the way the parable ends is that the prodigal son never even begins the journey home.
- H. Why not?
 1. **Because going home means he is still attached to his father. He's still attached to home... and that attachment IS his problem. It's his heartache and his pain.**
- I. So how should he solve it?
 1. The prodigal son sits under a tree. He meditates. He realizes his suffering comes from his attachment—to the father, to the inheritance, and to his own identity as a son.
 2. His desire to go home is the problem.
 3. So he extinguishes that desire. He reaches heavenly indifference. Heavenly apathy. They call it Nirvana. He does not go home. He realizes home is an illusion.
 - a) There is no Father to reconcile with.
 - b) The goal is not relationship.
 - c) The goal is release.
- J. The most widely read Buddhist scripture (the Dhammapada), puts it like this:
 1. **"You yourselves must strive; the Buddhas only point the way."**
 2. Don't miss the weight of that.
 3. Buddhism will point in a direction but it does not give you a Savior.
 - a) And YOU must strive in that direction, and you must do it with your own determination and grit.

- K. That desire for home, that desire for your Father, that desire for love—the very engine of the prodigal story—that is the exact thing you must pour a bucket of cold water upon and extinguish like a candle.
- L. If Jesus sat down with a Buddhist, He wouldn't mock their focus on suffering. He would deepen it.
 - 1. He would say, 'You see how desire enslaves the heart. You have sought peace through detachment. But come to Me—attach your heart and soul and mind and meaning to me—all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.'
 - a) **Buddhism seeks liberation from self. Jesus offers redemption of the self. Because for Jesus the self is sacred.**
 - b) You are sacred. You are worth loving, worth knowing, worth saving, worth embracing.
 - c) To Jesus...
 - (1) You are valuable.
 - (2) You are meaningful.
 - (3) You are capable.
 - (4) And you are beautiful.
 - (a) No matter what anybody has told you, or what you have done, or what lines you have crossed.
 - d) Don't let the devil or anybody tell you that hardening your heart is the solution to the things that are hurting your heart.
 - e) The solution is bringing your heart to the One who loves you—the one who loved you to the sacrifice of an old rugged cross—the One who is the safest of all safe spaces—and to find your healing and salvation in him.
 - f) If you don't know him that One is Jesus.
- M. And yet in Buddhism, the burden is entirely on the prodigal daughter or son. Not to come home to but reach a state where home and Father and salvation and love itself stop mattering at all.
- N. To our Buddhist friends we would say:

1. The human person is not an illusion to be transcended, but a beloved masterpiece ready to be restored.

IV. Hinduism

- A. Under Hinduism, actions have consequences. You broke something. You owe.
- B. No amount of anybody's mercy can ever fix a cosmic debt.
 - 1. There is a moral order to the universe, and it is not moved by sentiment. Not even by grace. Not even by love.
- C. So under Hinduism, prodigals do return home.
 - 1. But they are not unconditionally welcomed. They must work. They must serve.
 - 2. They must live life after life, burning off bad karma.
 - 3. They must earn back their honored place in the divine order.
- D. The Hindu Scriptures say this:
 - 1. **"Elevate yourself through the power of your mind, and do not degrade yourself, for the mind can be the friend and also the enemy of the self." (Bhagavad Gita 6.5)**
- E. You elevate yourself. It's your karma. Your effort. Your sweat.
- F. The karmic debt is yours to settle.
- G. In England, two hundred years ago, if you could not pay your debts, they threw you into a prison called "debtor's prison."
- H. Here was the cruel irony: you were not allowed to leave until your debt was paid in full... but because you were locked in a cell, you had no way to work and earn what you owed.
- I. Unless someone outside the prison paid your debt for you, you stayed trapped — consequence without a door.
- J. Karma is a cosmic debtor's prison.
 - 1. It demands you settle the bill of your past actions.
 - 2. Lifetime after lifetime. Cell after cell.
- K. So in Hinduism, even if the prodigal comes home... he does not get the royal robe or ring, and no feast for him.
 - 1. He gets an impossible bill worth more than everything he owns and he has to pay it... no matter how many lifetimes it takes.
- L. In Hinduism, the burden is on you alone to make yourself worthy of the favor of the gods, no matter how many cycles of reincarnation it takes.
 - 1. And even more disturbing, the same verdict tells you that the suffering you're facing today is actually your punishment for sins you committed 10,000 yesterdays ago and have no memory of ever committing.
 - a) How does that feel to you?
- M. If Jesus were sitting with a Hindu friend, He would recenter the conversation around grace — not liberation earned through accumulated merit, but divine love given as gift.
- N. **Jesus knows where he is going and the price he will pay.** And he knows that on that Cross, even as he has absorbed the full measure of every human sin, and even as he has taken into himself every last drop of punishment... he knows he will cry out... IT IS FINISHED... the most shockingly glorious words ever heard by the ear of a sinner.
- O. And he will also know that another way to translate that same single word is the glorious saying: PAID IN FULL.
 - 1. Your anger, your hatred, your bullying... Paid in full.
 - 2. Your crimes, your dishonesty, your thefts... Paid in full.
 - 3. Getting wasted, getting stoned, getting drunk, losing your mind... Paid in full.
 - 4. Pride, self satisfaction, smugness, arrogance, superiority... Paid in full.
 - 5. Immorality, sexual sins, twisted stuff, secret sins and secret shames... demonism, occultism, Satanism, witchcraft, idol worship, unkindness, narcissism, greed, self pity, laziness... paid in full, paid in full, paid in full, paid in full, paid in full.
 - a) I'm trying to say that if you've done it, and it's bad, it's already paid in full because Jesus shed his blood for you on Calvary's cross. And once it's paid, it is finished.
 - (1) God is finished with it and you can be finished with it too.

- b) And I'm also trying to tell you that there is no religion or system or science or philosophy ever imagined in all the long ages of the human story that offers anything even close to this wonderful gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

(1) We're only talking about 3 religions today, but we could talk about 300 or 3,000 because in the end, they're all the same.

(2) That's because when it comes to Good News, Jesus Christ cornered that market before the foundations of the world.

V. Islam

- A. Islam takes the reality of God with maximum seriousness. In this religion, God is Sovereign, God is Just, and God is called Merciful — but He does not lead with affection.
- B. The very word Islam means submission.
 1. You might say, Bill, doesn't Christianity call Christians to submit? Yes, but it's different. In Islam, when you submit you do so as a mere servant without rights before God.
 2. In Christianity, when you submit, you do so as a royal member of the family of God, possessing dominion and rank and authority, and the right to rule, under the Lordship of Christ and as a joint heir with Christ.
- C. Islam also teaches repentance. Their word is *Tawbah* — turning back to God — and without it a person is hopeless.
 1. Here is where the prodigal son parable is different.
- D. Under Islam, the prodigal son repents. He returns home.
- E. But under Islam above all else, God stands as the ultimate Judge, and His law must be satisfied.
- F. In this ending to the parable, the son may be forgiven (maybe) — but only if he checks all the boxes.
 1. He must submit to the law.
 2. He must perform good deeds.
 3. He must balance the scales of justice through faithful effort and duty and religion and even the ultimate sacrifice.
- G. The Qur'an says:
 1. "Those whose scale is heavy with good deeds, it is they who will be successful. But those whose scale is light, they are the ones who have lost their souls." (Surah Al-Mu'minun)
- H. Under this system, when the prodigal son comes home, everything is conditional.
 1. A robe on his back? Maybe yes, maybe no.
 2. A ring on his finger? Maybe yes, maybe no.
 3. A feast? Maybe yes, maybe no.
- I. And here is what breaks the heart of the parable:
 1. The son can come all the way home... and still never get a loving Father's embrace.
 2. No Dad running down the road.
 3. No strong muscular arms around a broken son's dirty neck.
 4. No kisses, no tears, no feasting, no joy.
 - a) None of it.
- J. Because in this ending, nothing wondrous can happen until the scales are brought out, and his works are weighed, and his sincerity is measured, and his worthiness assessed.
 1. Under Islam, the nervous prodigal can come all the way home and still never know if he is wanted — he'll only find out once he proves he can measure up... "Now get to work and pay off your debt and I'll let you know if you can ever be called my child again."
- K. If Jesus sat down with a Muslim friend, He would say:
 1. "You seek to submit to the Most Merciful. But I came that you might know God not only as Master and Judge, but as the most loving Father the world has ever seen — the Dad who seeks the lost, forgives the guilty, and lavishes grace on the undeserving and unworthy... all thanks to a Savior and his old rugged cross."
- L. The difference is a loving Father's passionate heart.
 1. In Islam, mercy is real, but you must climb a moral ladder to reach it — and even at the top, you may never hear Him call you His child.
 2. In the Gospel, grace does not wait at the top of your moral ladder. It meets you at the bottom, runs the last stretch to get you, and opens wide his arms for you while you are still a long way off.
- M. In Jesus, God does absolutely everything — and then calls your name, echoing through the heavens, that he might welcome you home free of charge, and free at last.

VI. Three World Religions, One Verdict

- A. **Three traditions. Three paths. One verdict.**
- B. And every one of them leaves you with the same burden: it is on you.
 1. Buddhism says, "Stop wanting."
 2. Hinduism says, "Start working."
 3. Islam says, "Start submitting."
- C. Different words. Different systems. Different ladders.
- D. But at the bottom, they all say the same thing: the climb is yours, the debt is yours, the effort is yours.
- E. And if you have lived under that pressure, you know what it does to a human soul.
 1. It exhausts you.
 2. It makes you perform.
 3. It makes you hide.
 4. It makes you carry a weight you were never meant to carry.

- F. That is why the Prodigal Son matters. Because every one of us knows what it is like to be the prodigal.
 - 1. You know what it is like to wonder if you still can come home to God.
 - 2. You know what it is like to rehearse your apology and hope it might be enough.
 - a) That is religion.
 - b) That is performance.
- G. Let's bring King Solomon back into the picture.
 - 1. He had everything.
 - a) Wisdom. Wealth. Power. Access.
 - 2. And he married the world.
 - a) One altar here. Another altar there. A thousand voices. A thousand gods to try.
 - 3. He did not reject the Creator God, Elohim, outright.
 - 4. He just kept making room for everything else.
 - 5. And that is what people still do.
 - a) You don't have to burn a Bible to walk away from God. You just have to divide your heart.
 - b) You just keep adding one more altar in the hallway of your life.
 - (1) The altar of success. The altar of approval. The altar of image. The altar of comfort, of appearance, of popularity.
 - 6. And after long enough, your life gets crowded with gods that cannot save you.
 - 7. After experiencing a thousand gods of the nations of the world, King Solomon wrote his conclusion in his memoir:
 - a) *"Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear [Trust] God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man."* (Ecclesiastes 12:13)
 - 8. Sweep away these other gods and listen to the one God who knows you because he made you. Elohim. The one God. The true God. The only God.
- H. Let's go back where we started:
 - 1. No other name. No other rescue. No other way home. No one comes to the Father but by Him.
- I. There's no other name because there's no other God who ever has done or ever will do this:
 - 1. *"And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him."* (Luke 15:20)
- J. Church, do not miss this.
 - 1. He is still a great way off. Still dirty. Still broken.
 - 2. Still carrying the shame of what he did and the fear of what it cost.
- K. But the Father sees him.
- L. And the Father runs.
 - 1. That is not religion. That is grace.
- M. And Christian, hear me carefully: do not waver on this.
 - 1. Do not build your life on grace on Sunday and then crawl back under law on Monday.
 - 2. Do not sing about mercy and then live like you still have to pay God back.
 - 3. Do not talk like you are saved by Jesus and then act like you are held together by performance.
- N. Christianity is not real because Christians are strong.
 - 1. Christianity is real because Christ is risen.
 - 2. Christianity is not true because we never fail.
 - 3. Christianity is true because Jesus never failed, never lied, never sinned, never broke, never quit, and never lost even one person who's put their faith in him.
- O. We do not stand on our goodness, our record, or our emotional stability.
 - We stand on HIS grace.
 - 1. Grace is not a backup plan. Grace IS the plan.
 - 2. Grace is the gospel.
 - 3. Grace is the reason the Father ran to you.
- P. So if you are weary, come home.
 - 1. If you are ashamed, come home.
 - 2. If you have been flip-flopping, and wondering if our faith is real, come home and stay here. .
- Q. Stop negotiating with what Jesus already settled.
- R. Stop living like the Cross of Christ was partial.
 - 1. Stop acting like the tomb is still occupied.
 - 2. Stop speaking as though grace isn't enough.
 - 3. Stop looking around and make this Jesus the center of your whole life.
- S. Christianity is real because Christ is real.
 - 1. And if Christ is real, then grace is real.
 - 2. And if grace is real, then let's take our stand without wavering.
- T. There is one name. One Savior. One road home.
- U. Because there's just just nobody like our Jesus.