

September 18, 2016

World Religions: Hinduism
Ephesians 2:1-10

Opening words: Can I ask you a question? Why are you a Christian? Can you answer that question without revealing to the world your prejudices? Your prejudices are not funny, because they expose your ignorance. Can you answer that question without giving your family history? One of the blessings in your life is that you were born into a Christian home. Can you answer that question without mentioning your relationships within the church? You can make friends anywhere. Can anyone here answer the question, why are you a Christian, with sound theological reasoning? This sermon series, *World Religions*, is designed to help you answer the question, why are you a Christian, using basic Christian theology. Each one of the other world religions has theological flaws. Next week, we look at the theological flaw in Buddhism. Today, we look at the theological flaw in Hinduism.

Our scripture reading for today is Ephesians 2:1-10. The letter to the Ephesians was written by the Apostle Paul about the year 60 AD. The city of Ephesus was the important city in Asia Minor, now Turkey. It was important because it was a major commercial center. Paul made it his center of evangelism for three years. Our reading for today tells us about grace. These ten verses can be summarized into three words: Dead, dominated and delivered. We were dead in sin. We were dominated by sin. We were delivered from sin by God's grace. Verse four is key. It says, "*It is by grace that you have been saved.*" Webster defines grace as, *unmerited divine assistance*. Classic Hindu theology lacks grace. It is for that reason I am glad I am not a Hindu. May God open your ears to hear these sacred words.

Ephesians 2:1-10 As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, ² in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. ³ All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. ⁴ But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵ made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. ⁶ And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, ⁷ in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— ⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast. ¹⁰ For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Let me begin by asking you this question: What do these five people have in common?

Julia Roberts
Russell Brand
George Harrison
Ricky Williams
Jerry Garcia

This is the answer: Each one of these celebrities practices Hinduism. As a matter of fact, each one converted to Hinduism from Christianity. They are not the only Hindus in the world.

Did you know there are one billion Hindus in the world? That is 15% of the world's population. Hinduism has been called the oldest religion in the world. India is the home of approximately 95% of the world's Hindus. There are 2.23 million Hindus in the United States. That number has grown by 85.8% in the last seven years. I am assuming that number will continue to climb. The closest Hindu congregation is on Sodom Hutchings Road in Girard. So what do those one billion people believe?

I want to make a confession at this point. I am uncomfortable with this section of my message for two reasons. First, I do not claim to be an expert on Hinduism. I am still struggling with Christianity. Second, Hinduism is complex to say the least. However, I am comfortable passing along four basic Hindu beliefs.

1. Hindus believe in **Brahman**. The question is not, who is Braham? The question is, who are Brahman? From my perspective, Hindus are polytheistic. While we believe in one true God with three personalities, Father, Son and Holy Ghost, Hindus believe in over three hundred and thirty gods and goddesses. Collectively, these three hundred and thirty gods and goddesses are called Brahman. It is much like calling our country America, even though we have 322 million citizens. Hindus believe in Brahman. If you basically understand Brahman, say, "**Amen!**"
2. Hindus believe in **Atman**. The Christian world believes in original sin. It is the sin we acquired from Adam. One of the reasons we baptize infants is to address this problem of original sin. In the Hindu world no one sins, because within every soul is a piece of a god which prevents them from sinning. They reject sin but they accept ignorance. They say, they live in ignorance of the divine truth. That piece of god within them is called the Atman. Hindus believe in Atman. If you basically understand Atman, say, "**Amen!**"
3. Hindus believe in **reincarnation**. In the Christian world we believe in the afterlife. Those who believe in Jesus go to heaven. Those who do not believe in Jesus go to hell. Everyone I know thinks they are going to heaven because hell is reserved for the truly wicked, like Hitler. Hindus do not really believe in the afterlife. They believe when you die, you re-enter the world in another

physical form. Your position in your new life reveals how you lived your previous life. You keep re-entering the world until you get it right. It is only after you live a perfect life that you become one of the gods. Perfection is impossible, so you are trapped in this world for eternity. I can only speak for myself. I only want one shot at life, because life is hard. Am I alone? Have you ever longed to go to heaven and be reunited with past loved ones? Hindus have no such hope. Hindus believe in reincarnation. If you basically understand reincarnation, say, **"Amen!"**

4. Hindus believe in **karma**. What is karma? Let me say this with reincarnation in mind. How you live your life today will affect your future. If you live a good life this time, then you will have a better life next time. Those who struggle in this world are being punished for their past bad lives. That is why the lowest in their society, the "untouchables", are never helped. They are being punished for their past bad lives. For this reason, there is no sense of true community. In Christianity, we care about one another because everyone should be treated with dignity and respect. Hindus believe in karma. If you basically understand karma, say, **"Amen!"**

This message could have easily been written about any of those four beliefs. They all stand in contrast to orthodox Christian theology. However, today, I don't want to look at what they believe. I want to look at what they don't believe. I want to look at something Hindus ignore, yet we, in the Christian world, find vital. Hindus ignore grace, but we can't live without grace. As I worked on this message I rediscovered how vital grace really is to us. Grace has changed the way we look at life itself. Just think about it for a moment.

Because of grace, your past does not have to define you. In other words, you don't deserve a second chance, but you get a second chance. We have the opportunity to learn from our mistakes so we can have a better future. How many past mistakes haunt you? Ask God to forgive you and you will be forgiven. The only thing you have to do is forgive yourself and do better next time. How many people do you know who are stuck in the past? They would make great Hindus.

The Second World War ended on September 2, 1945. Much of Europe lay in ruins and many of the former Nazi soldiers found themselves incarcerated. One such soldier found himself in Scotland. His time moved slowly. He had too much time to think. He thought about what his government had done to many in Europe, including the Jews. Those thoughts made him sick. He thought about his home and wondered about his family and friends; were they alive or dead? He thought about his future. He wondered if he had a future. He wondered if God would forgive him. Would he spend his eternity in torment? There was just too much time to think. In 1947, that routine was broken by an invitation. A Christian conference was being held for young people around the world. The group from the Netherlands wanted to meet with German POWs who had attacked

their homeland. Our young soldier was one of them. He feared that he would be greeted with hatred and disdain. He wasn't. Instead, he was greeted with love and forgiveness. That experience changed everything. He discovered that despite all that had passed, "God looked on him with shining eyes of his eternal joy." He discovered that day that he did have a future. That young soldier's name was Juergen Moltmann, one of the great theologians of the twentieth century. Later in life he wrote, "*God is our last hope because we are God's first love.*" If Moltmann had lived in a Hindu society, there would have been no second chance. He would have lived and died a broken man. Grace saved his life. Because of grace, your past does not have to define you. If you are thankful for grace, say, "**Amen!**"

Because of grace, you are not trapped in perfectionism. In the Hindu world, the goal is perfectionism. They are going to re-enter the world until they live the perfect life. But perfection is impossible. Is anyone here living a perfect life? Is there anyone here who has never committed a single sin? Let me answer that for you. The answer is, NO! In our society, we have admitted we will never be perfect. So we have replaced perfectionism with hard work. Some, maybe you, believe salvation can be earned.

In 1904, Max Weber published a book called *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Weber was the first one to coin the phrase, the "protestant work ethic". What is the protestant work ethic? It is a concept in theology, sociology, economics and history that emphasizes hard work, discipline and frugality. The western world has been highly influenced by the protestant work ethic. If you hate seeing the government give things away to people who could work, then you have been influenced by the protestant work ethic. This is the theme: Anything of value must be earned. Those who work hard are prized above all others. I am not knocking the protestant work ethic. Each one of us has benefitted from the protestant work ethic in this world, but it is of no value when it comes to salvation. We are all saved by grace and by grace alone. Ephesians 2:8 and 9 say, "*For it is by grace you have been saved. Not by works so no one can boast.*" Your good works are not earning your salvation. Your good works are simply saying, "Thank you" to God for saving your soul. Hindus will never escape this world because the perfect life is impossible. You can never work your way into heaven. We are going to heaven because of grace. If you are thankful for grace, say, "**Amen!**"

How many of you remember the name Lane Thomas Graves? I hope you never forget him. I know you remember his story. Lane was a two-year-old and lived in Omaha, Nebraska. He was vacationing in Disney World in Orlando, Florida with his family. Do you remember the story now? He was doing nothing wrong; his father was doing nothing wrong, when the unthinkable happened. The two-year-old was attacked and killed by an alligator. I don't know how the parents go on. How could you enjoy anything in life after losing a child that way? Over the past few months, I have found myself praying for Lane's parents. On the day of his funeral, I found myself praying for his priest. It is hard to find the right words. I wondered what I would say. It is at moments like this I am glad I am not a Hindu.

Because of grace, we have hope in the face of death. If Lane Graves had been a Hindu, then his funeral would be different. I do not find their words comforting: Lane will now re-enter this world in another form. However, you will never recognize him. The good news is, Lane Graves was a Christian, so a reunion with him down the road is possible. Jesus's resurrection changed everything. Because of Jesus' death, death has no hold on us. Why are you a Christian? Let me give you a one-word answer: grace! Juergen Moltmann once said, "*God is our last hope because we are God's first love.*"