

September 25, 2016

World Religions: Buddhism
Philippians 4:4-7

Opening words: 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. Last week, we looked at Hinduism. Their flaw was an absence of grace. Today, we look at Buddhism.

Our scripture reading for today is Philippians 4:4-7. The church has always agreed the epistle to the Philippians was written by the Apostle Paul. It was penned from Rome while he was under house arrest. The date was the year 61. He wrote to the Philippians to thank them for a gift, yet he also writes for their spiritual edification. Never forget, the city of Philippi was a Roman colony and her citizens were Roman citizens. May God give you ears to hear these sacred words.

Philippians 4:4-7 Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵ Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Let me begin with this old preaching story. The famous preacher D.L. Moody told about a Christian woman who was always bright, cheerful, and optimistic, even though she was confined to her room because of illness. She lived in an attic apartment on the fifth floor of an old, rundown building. A friend decided to visit her one day and brought along another woman -- a person of great wealth. Since there was no elevator, the two ladies began the long climb upward. When they reached the second floor, the well-to-do woman commented, "What a dark and filthy place!" Her friend replied, "It's better higher up." When they arrived at the third landing, the remark was made, "Things look even worse here." Again the reply, "It's better higher up." The two women finally reached the attic level, where they found the bedridden saint of God. A smile on her face radiated the joy that filled her heart. Although the room was clean and flowers were on the window sill, the wealthy visitor could not get over the stark surroundings in which this woman lived. She blurted out, "It must be very difficult for you to be here like this!" Without a moment's hesitation the shut-in responded, "It's better higher up."

She was not looking at her temporal dwelling. With her eyes of faith fixed on the eternal, she had found the secret of true satisfaction and contentment; God! If you have ever looked to God during times of hardship say, **"Amen!"**

Let me continue with this question. What do these six people have in common?

Orlando Bloom
Herbie Hancock
Richard Gere
Tina Turner
Steven Seagal
Tiger Woods

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

Did you know there are 488 million Buddhists in the world? That is approximately 6.6% of the world's population. China is the country with the largest number of Buddhists, 244 million. In other words, 50% of Buddhists live in China. There are 1.2 million Buddhists in the United States - 40% of that number lives in Southern California. The number of Buddhist Americans is expected to grow by 58% by the year 2050. All of that research was done by the Pew Research group. The closest Buddhist temple is located at 2951 Kent Road, Stow. So what do Buddhists believe?

Like last week, I have to confess, I am a little uncomfortable with this section of this message for two reasons. First, I am not an expert on Buddhism. As a matter of fact, I am still struggling with the Christian faith. Second, Buddhism is complex and I simply didn't have the time to research it thoroughly. However, there are certain things I do understand about Buddhism.

The Buddhist faith can be traced back to a man named Siddhartha Gautama. He was born in 563 BC in present day Nepal. He was a Hindu. His father was a prince who ruled over a small country. Siddhartha Gautama was deeply loved by his father, who sheltered him from the harshness of this world. Not uncommon for his day, he married at the age of sixteen. In time, the young couple welcomed a son. He was content with his life until he reached the age of twenty-nine. At twenty-nine he left the royal palace for the first time in his royal chariot and saw the real world. The harshness shocked him. He saw a man bent over from age. He saw a man stricken with disease. He saw a corpse at a funeral. He saw the starving and the homeless. He saw it all. He wanted to help these people, but was clueless. His religion, Hinduism, offered them no help or hope. (Do you remember from last week? Hinduism does not care for the down-and-out because they are being punished for their past lives.) Frustrated, Siddhartha Gautama goes on a great spiritual quest. At the age of 35, he falls into a trance and becomes enlightened. The Pali word for enlightenment is "Buddha". Siddhartha Gautama became the Buddha – the Enlightened One. Listen to what I am about to say. The Buddha was

not a god. The Buddha was a man. Buddhism is not a religion to save your soul. It is a philosophy to survive in this world. For the rest of his life he taught the secret of how to tolerate the suffering in this world. When the Buddha died, people committed themselves to remembering his life and to carrying on his teachings. This is the question that dominates this message.

How do you tolerate the suffering in this world? Buddhists tolerate suffering using what they call "The Four Noble Truths." These are the four. The goal is to detach yourself from the suffering of this world.

- 1. The First Noble Truth is: life is suffering.** Life is full of misery: birth, ageing, sickness and death are all suffering. Though people strive for pleasure they receive only pain: sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, despair, contact with the hated and separation from the loved. And even if they do achieve a little happiness they soon tire of it and again become discontent.
- 2. The Second Noble Truth is the cause of suffering.** Desire and greed always lead to dissatisfaction. Craving and attachment for sensual pleasures, the desire to end sorrow and the ambition to go on living: all these are the causes of rebirth, which brings further suffering.
- 3. The Third Noble Truth is the cessation of suffering.** When craving and desire are relinquished, suffering and discontent end, and in their place comes satisfaction and peace.
- 4. The Fourth Noble Truth is the way to cessation of suffering.** The Buddha taught a Middle Way, that avoided either excessive pleasure-seeking or excessive hardships. This middle way leads to enlightenment, and is called the Noble Eightfold Path; their guideline for balanced living.

The key word in Buddhism is detachment. That is how Buddhists deal with suffering. If you generally understand how Buddhists handle suffering, say, "**Amen!**" In Christianity we handle hardship and suffering in a far different way. We turn to God. With this in mind, let us look at this morning's scripture lesson.

This morning we are in the fourth chapter of Philippians. Do you remember the opening words? The letter was written by the Apostle Paul about the year 61. He wrote the Philippians to thank them for a gift, yet he also writes for their spiritual edification. His words come to life only after you wrestle with this fact: Paul is under house arrest and facing an uncertain future. It is safe to say that his life was filled with hardship and suffering. Paul's best friend was stress. With nothing to do but look up, Paul writes these words:

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵ Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

The original Greek word for joy in this text does not mean happy, laughing and skipping. The word means contentment. In spite of all of his suffering and hardship, Paul was content because he had his eyes fixed on God. Paul was not the last one to look to God during periods of suffering and hardship. The church has always turned to God during suffering and hardship.

One of the great historic creeds in the life of the church is the Nicene Creed. It was written in the year 381. Nicene is a city in present day Turkey. That council was held to define exactly what the church believed. When the delegates arrived, the majority had some infirmity. History tells us that of the 318 delegates, fewer than 12 had not lost an eye, or lost a hand, or did not limp on a leg lamed by torture for their Christian faith. Those delegates did what Christians have always done during suffering and hardship. They looked to God for assurance and help. I do not understand why our generation thinks we should be excused from the hardship and suffering. Hardship and suffering are part of the human experience. They are part of our faith. How we respond during times of hardship and suffering defines our faith. We have always looked to God for assurance and hope. Why are you a Christian? One of the reasons I am a Christian is because I can look to God during hardship and suffering. If I were a Buddhist, I couldn't look to God for assurance and hope, because they do not believe that God exists. When was the last time you looked to God during a time of hardship and suffering?

Four years ago, I officiated at a wedding for Jessica and David. I knew them from my days in the Cleveland area. They were a nice young couple and they had a beautiful wedding. The last time I saw them was at their reception. That was in 2012. Two months ago, I received a voice mail from Jessica. The message was hard to understand so I listened to it several times. The words were hard to accept. Jessica told me that David had suddenly died. When I returned the call, I asked her how I could help. We asked me to come to his calling hours and asked me to pray with her. She ended our discussion with these words, "Russ, I need God more now than I ever have before." There was no doubt in my mind she was a Christian. Christians have always looked to God during times of suffering and hardship. I was glad Jessica wasn't a Buddhist, who can't look to God during times of suffering and hardship, because they don't believe in the existence of God. When was the last time you looked to God during a time of hardship and suffering? If you will admit you have looked for God in your life, say, **"Amen!"**

Horatio Spafford (1828-1888) was a Chicago lawyer. On the surface he seemed to have it all, but he didn't. His life was dominated by three great tragedies over a short period of time. The first was the death of his son. The second was the Chicago Fire in 1871. He had invested heavily on the shores of Lake Michigan just prior to the disaster. His losses nearly cost him everything. The third was the most painful. In 1873, he hoped to get away from his problems, so he decided to take his wife and four daughters to Europe. He would follow once they arrived. He had some business to complete. That reunion never happened. On November 22, 1873, their ship hit another ship and sank in twelve minutes. All four of his daughters perished; only his wife survived. On receiving the painful news, Spafford headed for Wales to join his grieving wife. It was on that ship between America and Wales that Spafford did something truly amazing. It symbolized his amazing faith. For on that ship he wrote a hymn the church has grown to love, *It Is Well with My Soul*. If Horatio Spafford had been a Buddhist, his story would have ended differently. He would not have looked to God for assurance and help because he would not have believed in the existence of God. I do not know how people endure this world without God. Why are you a Christian? There are many answers, but one is God, who offers us assurance and hope. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"