

The Gospel and the Buddhist

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[0 : 0 0] Amen. Well, thank you so much, Lawrence, for reading to us. Folks, maybe you want to have Matthew 11 open in front of you as we think about this topic tonight of the gospel, the heart of our faith.

And as we think about our Buddhist friends and how they understand and think about the world. And I've loved studying this and I really hope this is helpful to us. But why don't we just pause again just as we come, I guess, to God's word and let's pray together.

Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens. And I will give you rest.

Heavenly Father, we just thank you so much for loving us and giving us your son. Thank you that we have got your word in our own tongue.

We can read this and we can read about the promise that he makes us of rest. And so it's to him we look tonight.

[1 : 0 7] The risen, the ascended, the glorified, the one day to return, glorious Christ. And we pray tonight, Father, that what we know not, you would teach us.

What we have not, you would give us. Father, what we are not, you would make us. All for his glory. And to his wonderful name we pray these things.

Amen. Folks, kind of warm spring, May evening. Conscious you might be there feeling a little bit sleepy. Maybe at home as well you're doing that.

So you up for a few little jokes as we begin? Just to lighten the mood a little bit. You up for that? Yeah. Okay, here we go. A few little jokes as we begin. What's the only thing on the menu for pudding when you dine at the Karma restaurant?

You're just desserts. Okay, you can have that one for free. Another one you say, okay, let's go for it. Who is the most chilled out bear who lives in Jellystone Park?

[2 : 1 3] Yoga bear. Okay. Another one you say, no I won't. I'll stop there. Okay. Terrible even for my standards, those ones. Here's the reason I'm telling you them.

For your encouragement. Okay. If you got either of those jokes, and even if you didn't, I hope by the end of tonight you will, know that you know something about Buddhism.

Okay. Which is our theme, I guess, our subject for tonight. And I hope that encourages you as you maybe come to something, you think, I don't have a scooby-doo what's going on here, what this is about. Well, be encouraged that I think that you know a little bit more than I think you think you know.

So let me kind of just give you the roadmap for this evening. Okay. Here's my realistic, I hope, two-fold aim. Firstly, I want to kind of give us the 101 on Buddhism, right?

So we can kind of understand a few things about our friends in the way that they think. So what do Buddhists believe? How do Buddhists live? Where do we maybe see the traces of Buddhism in our culture today?

[3 : 1 3] Okay. Realistic aim, I hope, number one. Aim number two is to help us understand and maybe think about some of the ways that we can engage with our Buddhist friends.

Ways that we can maybe connect with them and share with them the gospel. And as well, off the back of that, help us critique a Buddhist worldview. As we do what a kind of good surgeon does, as they do the x-ray, and as they hold one x-ray up and they hold another one up.

That's what I hope we're going to be able to do tonight. As we hold up a Buddhist worldview and as we hold up a Christian worldview. And I hope we leave tonight understanding a bit more, maybe about the connections, but also the differences, and leave here tonight with a greater confidence in God's word and a Christian way of understanding the world.

Okay. Here's the thing. When it comes to Christian apologetics. Right. To steal a line from Andy Bannister, who we had last week helping us think about Islam. What we have to remember about apologetics is it's not just about answering people's questions.

It's also about questioning people's answers. Okay. Trying to understand how people think.

[4 : 28] And once we're on the subject, I guess, of apologetics. Let me just outline the kind of golden rule for us when we do these things. And it's we must always strive, no matter what the subject, to represent the other side in the most gracious and loving and accurate way as we possibly can.

Right. That's the kind of golden rule of Christian apologetics. I think it's just, it's a way of loving people well, loving our neighbor well, to try and represent them to the best of our abilities. And so let me just say in this whole area of Buddhism, I'm very aware that I'm still a novice.

And so if you hear me say something tonight that you feel could be improved in any way, friends, I'd love you to come and tell me because we want to do this well. We want to represent people well.

So let's dive in tonight then. Here is, as we begin, what you will find on the West London Buddhist Center. Okay. I know you're all on that website often, I'm sure.

But this is what you find. If you go on the website and you go to the about us slash frequently asked questions section. Here it is. Question. Is Buddhism a religion?

[5 : 42] Answer. Well, yes, it traditionally involves faith and devotion, ritual, myth, monks and nuns. Okay. Because we all know religion involves those things. But here's what it says.

Okay. But, and this is important, it is non-theistic. There is no God or source of absolute authority. This makes Buddhism unique amongst universal religions and allows it to be other things as well.

Really important to take that and maybe carry it with us through the rest of this evening. Hold those thoughts in your mind. So here is a religion of roughly 535 million people, according to the internet.

Okay. The majority of which live on the east side of the world, I guess that we would know. Countries, for example, like China, Tibet, Thailand, Korea. A religion founded by a man by the name of Siddhartha Gautama, the original Buddha, sometime between 560-500 BC.

Call it something like that. Now, from what I can see, I think there's very good evidence to suggest that he was a real person. Okay. Real person. But what's interesting is what many Buddhists hold to today is kind of the compiled teachings of Buddha coupled with a collection of myths and stories about him which may or not be true and seem to have evolved and developed culturally over time.

[7 : 10] Okay. Now, I listened to a podcast recently called Unbelievable. I don't know if some of you listened to that. It's a really interesting podcast, Justin Brarley. And what he does is he gets guests on with different worldviews and they just have a conversation around the table.

It's really fascinating every time I go on a run and try and listen to it. Really interesting. This particular episode that I listened to, you can probably guess, they had a Christian and a Buddhist talking about how they understand the world.

And that exact question was put to the Buddhist. Does the kind of mystical aspect of Buddhism bother you, the host asked? To which the Buddhists responded, not really.

Let me ask you tonight, would it bother you as a Christian if you found out that the feeding of the 5,000 may or may not have happened, as you read about it in the Gospels?

Would it bother you as a Christian? That Mary may or may not have been a virgin? That Jesus in particular may or may not have come back to life? And there may or may not have been a guy called Paul who traveled around the Eastern Med in the first century telling people about Jesus?

[8 : 15] Would it matter to you? Hmm? Well, let me lovingly suggest that it should. Okay? It's really popular today, and I wonder if you've heard this.

People say, I wish I had your faith. Okay? I read Nick Clegg. I don't know if some of you read this. Nick Clegg, former leader of the Lib Dems. He commented in a recent interview that he did with Premier Christian News.

And he said, and I quote, Having faith must be the most wonderful thing. Now, I don't know about you, but I hear that. And I think to myself, listen, if you believe that Christianity is not true, then honestly, the last thing that you should do is envy me.

The last thing that you should do is envy me. You should, firstly, feel deeply sorry for me. Really, if you don't believe this is true, don't envy me. Feel sorry for me.

And again, that's not my opinion. That's exactly what the Apostle Paul says to the Christians in Corinth. He says, and if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless, and so is your faith.

[9 : 20] Here's one of the key differences I found in my research. Unlike Buddhism, Christianity stands or falls on the reliability of the Bible. Insofar as it accurately records for us the way that God has worked throughout history, and perhaps in particular as it records for us the person and the work of Jesus Christ.

In other words, our faith, the Christian faith rests on facts, not myths. So we can lean into the reliability of the Bible.

It is a firm foundation. And so with that, let me try and give you the kind of 101 of Buddhist thought and practice. Now, you'll appreciate that different Buddhists in different parts of the world believe slightly different things.

Okay, you've kind of got Zen Buddhists, Theravada Buddhists, Mahayana Buddhists, and there's no way we've got time to do all the different distinctives. Let me try and give us the spine. The spine of it.

Okay, so what's central, I guess, to Buddhist thought and practice. And then what we're going to do is we're going to piece it together and hold it up against a Christian understanding of the world.

[10 : 30] Remember, like I said, the surgeon holding up the x-rays. And we're going to do a little bit of a compare and a contrast exercise. That sound good? Yeah? So the teachings of the Buddha, which are recorded.

Buddha, by the way, is just a word that means enlightened one. They're collected together in the Dharma. And the key numbers, if you want to get to the heart of Buddhist understanding and thought, two numbers you need to remember.

Four and eight. Four and eight. Two numbers to remember. The four noble truths. Okay, so which is what Buddha taught as he sought to make sense of the world.

And all of this stuff, log it for later. This is really interesting when we compare it against how Christians understand the world. So there's a story told about Buddha, about how one day he saw a woman grieving from the loss of her son.

Okay, and he promised to bring him back to life if she could find some mustard seeds. Easy enough, thought the woman. However, said the Buddha, you must find them from a family who has never known misery like yours.

[11 : 35] So you can imagine this scene. Okay, she goes around and she starts knocking on the door of every neighbor. And the woman eventually returns having learned a lesson about the unavoidability of death and suffering. So the four noble truths revolve around this idea of suffering.

Truth number one of the four noble truths is the reality of suffering. Okay, it's common to all of us. So what then is the source of our suffering?

That is truth number two. We are the cause of the suffering. And in particular because of what I think Buddhism is calling us our ego, our desires, our desires for ourself.

It's our desires are wrong. Okay, because we attach ourselves to that which is temporary. Because important in Buddhist belief, remember, nothing is eternal.

It really matters. Nothing is eternal. Which is why any kind of possibility of an eternal God is an absolute non-starter. Okay, so if that's the cause of our suffering, what is the solution?

[12 : 43] That's truth number three. And it's quite logical, really, if you follow it through. To end suffering, you just stop doing what causes suffering. And central, and this is really important for us to see, central to this is this idea of detachment.

Okay, really crucial word. Detachment. Detachment. We separate ourselves from those things which are temporary and cause you pain. And what happens when you do that?

That's truth four. The more detached you become, the more enlightened you become. And so on this journey, that's number four. Here's number eight. The eightfold ethical path, which is how you should live your life.

Right, just rattle through these. View rightly. Okay, think about life through the eyes of the Buddha. Think about it with wisdom and compassion. Think rightly. Right, clear and kind thoughts build good and strong characters.

Speak rightly. Kind and helpful words. Conduct yourself rightly. Okay, others will know you from the way that you behave. Choose a right job. Okay, one that's not going to hurt others.

[13 : 47] The Buddha said apparently, do not earn your living by harming others. Do not seek happiness by making others unhappy. Strive rightly. Okay, do your best at all times.

Always maintain the goodwill towards others. Have a right mind. Always be conscious of what you're doing, which is why intoxication is out in Buddhism and it's ill-advised.

And finally, concentrate rightly. Concentrate rightly. Because if you do that, you will be able to find quiet and attain true peace of mind.

And you'll appreciate at this point, this is where things like yoga come in. Certainly central to the spiritual side of yoga is this idea of detachment. Okay, and the clearing of your mind and leading to that sense, I guess, of inner peace.

And it's really interesting to read about in this. Western people are commenting on this. And they're suggesting that the reason that yoga has made such inroads into our culture is because in our stress-mad world, people are seeing this as a form of stress relief and inner harmony and kind of physical recuperation as well.

[14 : 55] Which is, I guess, as a side is maybe why we must always think really carefully as Christians and ask good questions as we engage with people who are really into this stuff.

That's yoga. Now, listen, we've raced through that four and the eight. But I hope it just gives you maybe just a little bit of a flavor of how Buddhists think.

Four noble truths, the eightfold path. Now, we're going to move on to the X-ray part here. With that framework in place, let's just do a compare and contrast exercise.

Maybe we'll slow down a little bit at this point. And I just want to give you, and I seem to quote this guy in every sermon, and I don't mean to. He just kind of comes up, right? Here's what Christian thinker C.S. Lewis once said.

He said, Wonderful quote that.

[16 : 05] So what he's talking about is the fact that we all have a way of understanding the world and processing and viewing reality. And Christianity, according to Lewis and his story, is a fascinating one, provides the best way of making sense of the world.

Because as it shines, it illuminates everything else so that you can see clearly. See clearly. I think he's banging on the money. I think that's a fascinating observation. So let me just give you then, in the time that we have, two key differences between a Buddhist and a Christian worldview.

And then we're done. Okay? Two key differences between a Christian and a Buddhist worldview. Here's number one, that we have different understandings as to humanity's problem.

Right? For the Buddhists, suffering is a reality and death is a certainty. Which is why, just interestingly, you will always, as you see Buddhist festivals, you will always see flowers.

Because the flowers represent the fleeting but the beautiful nature of life. And we have to say at this point, and it's always good in apologetics to look for places of connection.

[17 : 20] It's interesting as you read around Christian missionaries who are interacting with Buddhists. Always say that Ecclesiastes is a really good place to go. Okay? We did that recently.

If you remember last year, we looked at the book of Ecclesiastes. It's one of the big points in the book, isn't it? Life is beautiful, but life is. Remember Hevel? Life is breath. It's impermanent, so much of it.

And death is a reality. I was reading about a guy this week on Twitter, a Christian pastor down south. He was asking questions about the best resources for Ecclesiastes. And he said to himself, and I'm also thinking about hiring a coffin for us as we preach through the series to put it at the front of the church.

Right? I had a little laugh to myself. But he said, that will make the point. Death is a reality. But here's where perhaps, if that's a place maybe of connection, here is perhaps where we would disagree with our Buddhist friends reverently, lovingly.

For the Buddhist, death is a natural part of the life circle. Okay? We don't have time to get into it tonight, but it simply leads to rebirth in the wheel of incarnation.

[18 : 29] Don't have time to do it tonight. But Google it. Don't Google it. Get into it in your own time if you want to understand about reincarnation. It's a natural thing, say the Buddhists.

Whereas Christianity would say, and I think this is really important, would say that death, while absolutely a reality, is very much unnatural.

I'm always amazed when I interact with my friends on this. They're actually amazed that Christianity has that view. Death is not just the way it is. Well, actually, when you go behind the scenes, back to the beginning of the Bible story, death was never part of God's original plan.

And they're amazed by that. Is that right? It is right. That there is an eternal, triune God who created the world and who made the very first human beings in his image.

It's why we've all got inherent worth and dignity. Eternal beings created to live in a relationship with him. But because of mankind's rebellion against our creator, sin has entered the world.

[19 : 35] And it's bigger than just you and I. It's not just us who are affected. All creation is affected. All creation is groaning. We thought about this this morning, groaning, longing to be set free.

So thinking about with Chloe this week, we were talking about just our favorite things. We were looking at Genesis 1, Genesis 2 in our family Bible times, talking about our favorite things that God has made in creation.

Just listing them. Mountains, waterfalls, the birds, the trees. How beautiful is creation. And yet, friends, if this is creation groaning, how wonderful will it be when Christ comes to bring it in?

Renewed, restored by its creator, like we started with in Colossians 1. Sin has entered the world.

Sin leads to death. So death is unnatural in the sense that it is not the way it's supposed to be. It's not the way God designed it. The Bible talks about it as the last enemy.

[20 : 37] Death is not the way it's supposed to be. Unnatural. And coupled with that, the Buddhist belief that the human problem is an internal one.

Right? It chiefly concerns our wrong desires. And I think this is where the concept of karma comes in. Now, karma and Buddhism is a lot more to it than my silly joke at the start.

Essentially, it's the law of cause and effect when it comes to pain and suffering. And particularly the focus is on, seems to be on one's motivations behind your actions. Bad motivations lead to bad actions.

Good motivations lead to good actions. And the ultimate goal, you can probably guess, is to choose the good over the bad. Choose the good karma over the bad karma. Again, you have to say, although we have got all sorts of objections to the idea of karma, because yes, actions have consequences, but no, friends, that the Bible never explains the suffering in this world as a straight line between cause and effect.

The very fact that Buddhism identifies an internal problem, again, we somewhat agree, don't we? We think of what Jesus said in Mark chapter 7.

[21 : 54] It's not what goes in, but what comes out of the heart that makes a person unclean. Jesus is talking about an internal problem. What does he say? For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that come evil thoughts.

The problem is an internal one. However, desires themselves are not the problem. They're part, I think, of what it means to be made in God's image. Right?

You read the Bible, it's full of desires, it's full of affections, it's full of emotions. Right? Sing to the Lord a new song. That's a desire. Come into his courts with thanksgiving and praise.

That's a desire. Worship him in the splendor of his holiness. That is a desire. The problem is that our desires are twisted. Right?

It was Martin Luther who said, the problem is that our hearts are, and how's your Latin? Incurvatus in se. Right? Curved in on themselves.

[22 : 54] That's what he said. We long for the wrong things. But the answer is not to cut off our desires. The answer is to be found in the God, the Christ who transforms our desires.

Okay? Now, we could go on for ages in this, but we need to move on. We have different understandings of humanity's problem. And we have different understandings, I'm sure you can guess it, of humanity's solution.

Okay? For the Buddhist, the answer, as far as I can tell, is summed up in this idea of detachment. Okay? Even stretching to incorporate love itself.

Buddha was reported, and again, I want to stress that reported, to have said, he who loves 50 people has 50 woes. He who loves no one has no woes. Okay?

So remove your attachment from the things in life that are temporary, and it will at some point be the source of your suffering and pain. Detach.

[23 : 58] Whereas the Christian would say the answer to our problem is not don't love and don't attach. The answer, rather, is found in the God in Christ who both loved and attached.

Right? In Christ, God who became man, who, if you like, Christ who attached himself to our humanity. Right? He attached himself to our problems.

He attached himself to our sin. You might know, friends, that the Buddha is often pictured as sitting. You think about the famous picture of Buddhism, the picture of the Buddha sitting under the Bodhi tree, known as the Tree of Enlightenment.

You've got that image in your head, sitting under the tree. You know, there's a tree as well, the heart of Christianity, isn't there? But Jesus is not under the tree. He's on the tree, taking the curse that we deserve on himself.

As he dies on the cross, taking the suffering that we deserve on himself. And incredibly, the Bible story is testament to the truth that our God is good enough that he can redeem suffering.

[25 : 13] Isn't it? He can use even the seemingly bad for his good purposes. It's just one of the threads that goes all the way through the Bible story. I think the cross is the ultimate. It's the zenith example of that, isn't it?

And most importantly, the Bible says that is the place of ultimate peace. Right?

Again, you just listen to Christian missionaries again, interacting with their Buddhist friends. They'll tell you that people have a street-level understanding of Buddhism. What they really want is peace and rest.

Peace and rest. And that is what Jesus is offering. We read it in Matthew 11 earlier. Peace with God through his blood on the cross.

Peace with others through his blood on the cross. Peace within. Think about this morning, having our sins wiped out through the blood of the Lamb. You see, unlike Buddhism, Christianity says true peace is found not in emptying your mind, but in filling it with the true knowledge of who Jesus Christ is and trusting him.

[26 : 21] The one who said, and I think this is my favorite promise in Scripture. Don't know about you. Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

Right? The rest that mankind was created to know that can only be found in relationship with our loving and joyful creator. That's where I want us to finish tonight. Holding out this promise that Jesus makes, I will give you rest.

And who is he? And I love this. He is the one who is not stern and cold. He is the one who is gentle and humble in heart, and who offers us through the cross in him rest for our souls.

And I love it, and we'll finish with this. One of the most celebrated truths of the gospel is this idea of peace. And it's also one of the features central to one of the most sung Christian hymns of all time, penned by Horatio Spafford.

Let me just finish with this. Friends, this is what Christ offers us tonight.

[27 : 48] Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we just thank you for this glorious promise that Christ, your Son, makes us.

Of rest. Of knowing you. Of knowing your fatherly love and your care for us. And Lord, I pray that you would help us, Lord, to know that more.

Whatever is going on in our lives as we sit here tonight, as we watch this tonight, whatever is going on in our lives, may we know the rest that Christ offers us. So, Father, we pray tonight as we think about interacting with our Buddhist friends.

Lord, help us to love people as Christ loved them. Thank you that he is the one who is gentle and humble in heart. So, Father, be with us this week as we continue our lives, as we live them for your glory.

Lord, be with us now as we turn to remember Christ's death, what he did on the cross for us, and his resurrection, as we remember communion together. Be with us now, Heavenly Father.

[29 : 00] In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.