

## How Good Is Good Enough? Three Statements of Jesus

Characteristic of Completeness: World

Big Idea: What if you're wrong?

Related Scriptures: Isaiah 64:6; Matthew 5:20; Luke 23:42; John 6:47; Romans 3:9-12, 20-25; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Ephesians 2:8-9

Introduction:

- A. There are over 6.5 billion of us on the planet, and most of us are religious. At least that's what the CIA says. Why the CIA keeps track of this stuff, I don't know. But here's ► their breakdown.

Eighty-six percent (86%) of us are religious; only 14% are not. Among the religious, there are ► four big groups: 33% are classified as Christians, 20% are Muslims, 13% are Hindus, and 6% are Buddhists. All ► other religious folks combined account for 14%.

- B. Regardless of where you find yourself in the religious chart, I want to ask you an important question: What if you're wrong?

I certainly don't want to be disrespectful, but I think it's a question worth asking: What if you're wrong? What if I'm wrong? What if we're both wrong? I'm not pointing a finger, just asking a question.

If you're new to Moon Valley, I should probably explain that I normally post at the bottom of the screen some reminders of what I'm talking about. I'm talking about our view of ► the World today. And under the general category of worldviews, the specific thing or ► big idea I'm pondering is this: What if you're wrong?

- C. I suspect that fewer and fewer are asking the question because more and more think that maybe nobody's wrong. There is a growing relativism that affirms the validity of just about any point of view. You may have heard of the parable of ► the elephant some people use to illustrate the point.

There are six blind men touching an elephant. One blind man touched the side of the elephant and said it was a wall. Another blind man touched the ear and said it was a large leaf of a tree. Yet another blind man was holding a leg and thought it was a tree trunk. Still another blind man took hold of the elephant's trunk and said it was a snake. Someone else was touching the elephant's tusk and believed it was a spear. Another blind man had the elephant's tail in his hand and was calling it a rope. All of the blind men were touching the same reality but were understanding it differently. They all had the right to interpret what they were touching in their own personal way, yet it was the same elephant.

The parable is intended to illustrate that different religions have different interpretations of reality, but the reality is the same. It appears to be one thing for the Buddhist and another for the Muslim. A Christian sees it one way, and a Hindu another way, and so on. Reality is one, but views of it are many.

The parable of the elephant is used to support the idea that maybe nobody is wrong, and maybe nobody can say they have a monopoly on the truth.

- D. At first blush, the parable does have a humble, open-minded, can't-we-all-just-get-along feel to it. I like that.

But I'm afraid the parable is not without problems.

First of all, we can't use it to prove anything because the reasoning is circular. The parable assumes what it tries to prove. It seeks to prove that all the blind men are touching different parts of the same elephant by assuming the very thing it seeks to prove: that all the blind men are touching different parts of the same elephant. The reasoning is circular. It is just as plausible to conclude that the blind men are touching entirely different things.

The parable also makes the assumption that the religions are not fundamentally contradictory. For example, if reality is an elephant, it would be legitimate for one blind man to say that reality includes something like a tail, and for another to say that reality has something like a trunk. These are not contradictory ideas. But to the extent that religious perspectives are irreconcilably contradictory, it seems like somebody's got to be mistaken.

Which leads me back to my question: What if you're wrong?

- E. I do think the parable of the elephant raises a good question. If all religions are different expressions of the same reality, then what is that reality? If an elephant represents a theory that harmonizes the different perspectives of the blind men, then what theory can be offered to harmonize the different perspectives of world religions? What's the basic thing that seems to characterize religions? What's the common thread?

Here's what I think. I'm not an expert in world religions, and I know I'm generalizing, but my investigation suggests to me that they all have ► some kind of merit system that gets you to a better place. A better place is necessary because, in one way or another, they all believe that there is a problem; something's not right with the way things are. One world religion commentator explains it ► this way:

*One of the few elements that world religions share is the assertion that humans don't live in harmony with the Ultimate Reality. ► In other words,*

*humanity does not manifest its purpose of existence. Life is a far cry from the ideal claimed by religion, so that humanity needs salvation from its present condition.*<sup>1</sup>

So ► religions, at least the big four, hold out a need for some kind of salvation from our present condition—a need to be in a better place. And some kind of merit system gets you to that better place. That’s the common thread. So maybe the elephant in the parable is the merit system.

1. For the Buddhist, the better place is *nirvana*, the escape from suffering through the elimination of all desires and cravings. And you get there by the “Eightfold Path,” which prescribes right knowledge, intentions, speech, conduct, livelihood, right effort, mindfulness, and meditation. That’s their merit system.
2. For the Hindu, the better place is *moksha*, a transcendent state of being in which one experiences a higher consciousness. And you get there by overcoming the illusions of this world (*maya*) through the way of works (Karma marga), the way of knowledge (Gnana marga) and the way of devotion to gods (Bhakti marga). That’s their merit system.
3. For the Muslim, the better place is heaven. And you get there by adhering to the Five Pillars of Faith and the Five Pillars of Worship. These are the basic requirements a Muslim is expected to fulfill. That’s their merit system.
4. For the Christian, the better place is also heaven. And for the majority of people who call themselves Christians, you get to heaven by some form of merit system. The majority of people in the “Christian” category are Roman Catholics (17%), so getting to heaven involves things like observing the sacraments within the Catholic Church. Even in the Protestant camp, lists of things to do to get to heaven or to be assured of heaven are the norm: Be baptized, repent, commit, confess, turn your life around, surrender, give your heart, pray the sinner’s prayer, avoid the really big sins, etc. That’s their merit system.

So it seems that most religious folks are operating on some kind of merit system. And the merit systems all involve some kind of list of good things to do to get to the better place.

In a way, I guess this is good. Being good is good. And the merit systems all include good things.

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<sup>1</sup> Ernest Valea, “Salvation and Eternal Life in World Religions,” available from <http://www.comparativereligion.com/salvation.html>; internet; accessed 3 April 2007.

But it does raise another very important question: ► How good is good enough? How good is good enough to get to the better place? Where's the pass-fail cut-off? Do you have to do 100% of the good things on the merit list? And must you do them 100% of the time? Or will 80% do? How about 51%?

Seems like nobody really knows. And because nobody really knows, we just assume. We just assume that good people will get to the better place. So, we pretty much mind our own business, try to be reasonably good people, and assume it's all going to pan out in the end. Assume the best.

This ► assumption is quite evident at funerals. In my line of work, you go to a lot of funerals. There's probably one thing I hear from people at funerals more than anything else. You've probably heard it, and you may have said it ► yourself: "Well, he's in a better place now." I don't question the sincerity of the expression at all. You'd really like think that the person is indeed in a better place. You'd really like to offer the bereaved that consolation.

But what if you're wrong? What if I'm wrong? What if we're both wrong?

- F. This ► morning I want to consider just three things Jesus said—three things that fly in the face of every religious merit system in the world, including the ostensibly Christian ones.
- I. The first statement came when Jesus was up on a mountain addressing a crowd of followers. It's recorded for us in ► Matthew 5:20. Jesus says,

<sup>NKJ</sup>Matthew 5:20 "For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds *the righteousness* of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven."

- A. This is a shocking statement. The ► scribes and the Pharisees of Jesus' day were considered to be the most holy, most righteous, most devout, most moral, most virtuous do-gooders around.

So, in today's terms, it would be like saying, "Unless you are greater philanthropist than Mother Theresa and a greater evangelist than Billy Graham and a greater social reformer than Martin Luther King and a greater prophet than Muhammad and more peaceable than Gandhi and wiser than Confucius and more holy than the Pope, then I'm afraid you're not getting into heaven."

In effect, Jesus is saying a lot of really good people aren't going to make it.

- B. But I don't think Jesus is saying, "You people need to be more righteous in order to get to heaven." Instead, I think he's saying, "Trusting in your own righteousness isn't going to get it done because it doesn't work, not even for the most righteous folks."

Being good is good; but, it's not good enough. Don't trust in your own goodness; you won't make it."

That's what I think He's saying. And here we have our first strong hint that Jesus does not advocate the merit system for getting to heaven. He is operating on some other nontraditional, nonreligious system.

II. Which brings us ► to Jesus' second statement.

A. Jesus is up on a cross, being crucified between two criminals. We don't know what the two criminals did, but it was probably pretty bad to receive the death penalty by crucifixion.

B. One of the criminals recognizes Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah, and asks Jesus for mercy. As recorded in Luke 23:42, he says,

<sup>NKJ</sup> Luke 23:42 . . . "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom."

C. That's when Jesus makes this statement—the second statement I want to consider. Jesus ► says to the criminal,

<sup>NKJ</sup> Luke 23:43 . . . "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise."

If possible, this second statement is even more shocking than the first. The criminal is not a good person, and he's in no position to bargain. He's in no position to do the things on anybody's religious merit list. He can't really say, "From now on, Jesus, I'll be good. I'll repent. I'll be baptized. I'll take communion. I'll go to church. I'll do anything." The guy's about to die; he can't follow through on anything.

He brings absolutely nothing to the table. He simply says, "Remember me."

And the bad criminal gets to heaven. Jesus says: "Today you will be with Me in Paradise."

Again, we don't know what the criminal did to get himself crucified, but the more heinous we imagine his crime to be, the harder it is to swallow what Jesus said.

Let's pretend the criminal was Jeffrey Dahmer. You may recall that Dahmer killed seventeen young men. He carved them up like a butcher, putting their pieces in a refrigerator. Then he ate them.

How are you feeling about the prospect of Dahmer going to heaven by simply saying to Jesus, "remember me"? Does it make you uncomfortable? I confess, it makes me a little uncomfortable.

Why would it make us uncomfortable? Is it because we've got our own little merit system going on, a merit system that says it's not fair for a really bad criminal like Dahmer to go to heaven?

- D. But we are faced with Jesus' first two statements. The first suggests that a lot of really good people aren't going to make it to heaven, and the second suggests that at least one really bad person did.

Now if these first two statements are true, I'm afraid Jesus just carved up our religious-merit-system elephant into a nice set of piano keys. He doesn't seem to be operating on a religious merit system at all.

### III. Which brings us to His ► third statement.

- A. Jesus introduced His first statement with, "I say to you." He introduced His second statement, adding "Assuredly, I say to you." And now He introduces this third statement, adding "Most assuredly, I say to you." It's almost like He wants us to get all this, and especially His last point. In ► John 6:47, He says,

<sup>NKJ</sup> John 6:47 "Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me has everlasting life."

Here we get confirmation that Jesus is not operating on a merit system at all; He's operating on a system of grace and forgiveness. It's the grace and forgiveness available through faith alone in Christ alone. There's no merit of any kind involved.

That's how Jesus could say the criminal would be in Paradise. The criminal simply trusted or believed in Jesus for eternal life. The criminal received forgiveness and everlasting life as a free gift by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. It's based on faith, not on any other thing the criminal did or didn't do.

So good people don't necessarily go to heaven; only forgiven people do. In order to get to heaven, Jesus is not saying, "Behave." He's saying, "Believe." That's it.

Of course behaving is something He expects us to do *after* we've believed and received the gift of eternal life. But behaving is in no way a condition for receiving the gift or keeping it.

- B. You may say, "Well, I do believe in Jesus, but it's not that simple. Believing is necessary, but it's not enough; there are other things you must do to get to heaven."

If that's what you believe, fine. But that's not what Jesus says. And if you don't believe what Jesus says about what it takes to get to heaven, where does that leave you? I wonder, is that not unbelief? Jesus offers the gift of eternal life absolutely free to all

who will simply believe Him for it. So I wonder, if you don't think He's telling the truth, then how is it that you believe Him?

The message of Jesus is clear: We are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

- C. You may say, "That's not fair." And in a way, you're right. It's not fair. But do we really want God to be totally fair with us? If fairness means getting from God only what we deserve, I don't think I want to go there.

Why? Because of Jesus' first statement. My righteousness isn't good enough. If I want to resurrect the merit-system elephant, it will crush me under the weight of its demands. You see, God doesn't grade on the curve. His grading is pass-fail, and His standard is sinless moral perfection. So, when I stack up all my righteous deeds, I may be able to look as good or better than some other folks according to my own little merit system, but I'm pitifully, hopelessly short of God's standard. Isaiah ► 64:6 says it so bluntly, it makes me pucker:

<sup>NLT</sup> Isaiah 64:6 We are all infected and impure with sin. When we display our righteous deeds, they are nothing but filthy rags.

This is a very polite English translation of some graphic Hebrew words. The term, ► "filthy rags" literally refers to soiled feminine napkins. Apart from God's grace offered through Jesus Christ, that's what we've got going for us, that's what we bring to the table: soiled feminine napkins.

No wonder every one of the big religions shares the belief that we've all got a problem. We do! It's sin.

But all the religious merit systems, including ones with Christian labels—they are not really solutions. They are symptoms masquerading as solutions. They are symptoms of our problem—the problem of selfishly, pridefully thinking I can be good enough, I can do it myself, I've got my own way of making things right, I don't need God that much.

Romans ► 10:3 explains it this way:

<sup>NLT</sup> Romans 10:3 . . . they don't understand God's way of making people right with himself. Refusing to accept God's way, they cling to their own way of getting right with God . . .

- D. Jesus is God's way. Jesus met God's standard for us. He paid for all our sin on the cross because of His great love for us. And by His death and resurrection for our sins, Christ alone offers forgiveness and the free gift of eternal life to all who will simply believe Him for it. That's "God's way of making people right with himself."

- E. But ► what if I'm wrong? What if Jesus is not the Lord? What if He was just a nice guy who stood for love and peace? What if He was nothing more than one more human being offering His personal views? What then?

Well, then I'd have to say, if Jesus is not God, He's not good. A good person does not tell good people they *won't* go to heaven if, in fact, they will. A good person does not tell a bad person he *will* go to heaven if, in fact, he won't. A good person does not offer eternal life to all who will simply believe him for it if, in fact, he has no authority to do so. We have names for mere humans who make such claims. Names like megalomaniac and lunatic.

But what if there's more? What if Jesus *is* God and He's telling us the truth because He loves us? And what if He rose from the dead to confirm it? What if He is offering grace and forgiveness to all? Everybody is welcome. Everybody gets in the same way. Everybody can meet the requirement. Simply believe in Jesus for eternal life, period.

Wouldn't that be good news? For many, that would be hope you've never dreamed of hoping for.

- F. Some of you probably walked into this place this morning operating on some kind of religious merit system, thinking that you've got a shot at getting to a better place because the good in your life outweighs the bad. That's perfectly understandable. You're probably a good person. I respect that.

But what if you're wrong?

“What If”  
by Nicole Nordeman

What if you're right  
He was just another nice guy  
What if you're right  
What if it's true  
They say the cross will only make a fool of you  
And what if it's true

What if He takes His place in history  
With all the prophets and the kings  
Who taught us love, and came in peace  
But then the story ends  
What then

\*But what if you're wrong  
What if there's more  
What if there's hope you never dreamed of hoping for  
What if you jump  
Just close your eyes  
What if the arms that catch you, catch you by surprise  
What if He's more than enough  
What if it's love

What if you dig  
Way down deeper than your simple-minded friends  
What if you dig  
What if you find  
A thousand more unanswered questions down inside  
That's all you find

What if you pick apart the logic  
And begin to poke the holes  
What if the crown of thorns is no more than folklore that must be told  
And retold

\*Repeat

'Cause you've been running as fast as you can  
You've been looking for a place you can land  
For so long  
But what if you're wrong

What if you jump

Just close your eyes  
What if the arms that catch you, catch you by surprise  
What if He's more than enough  
What if it's love  
What if it's love