

⇒ MY ⇒ PROBLEM *with God*

Message 4 | How can there only be one way?

Intro

Welcome back to Knight Theater! What an amazing weekend we had last weekend! I didn't realize how much fun and how uplifting to my soul it was going to be to have all of Mercy Church in one room together at one time.

Today we continue our series "My Problem with God." This is week four of 6. If you are new to Mercy, we have two more weeks in this series and it will be at our normal meeting space and I want to encourage you to check us out there (Three services – show times on screen). We are looking, these 6 weeks, at real problems doubters and believers alike have with the Christian faith and hopefully providing some thoughtful responses that help overcome some of those barriers to faith and challenge you to consider the claims of Christianity.

Today we are looking at the problem that probably gets Christianity in more hot water with people in our present day than any other. In a word the problem is Exclusivity.

The problem in a question often goes like this: "How can there be only one way to God?"

It's often thought of in a hypothetical that goes something like this: There is a remote tribe of people on one of the islands of Micronesia in the south pacific. A boy is born there, lives there his whole life and never leaves, never hears the name Jesus as he grows to be a man. No one in his tribe has ever heard the name Jesus. Then he grows old and then he dies. And the question I get is: What happens to the man on the island when he dies!? And usually the questioner is in full on gotcha mode when they get to this point. Because if the Christian says Jesus is the only way, it seems both unloving and arrogant in response to this very real example. But if the Christian says there is another way, it seems to make the Christian contradict himself or herself.

And this "only one way" idea is SO offensive, that as Christians when we get in spiritual conversations its almost like we don't want it to come up. Because we often don't know any way out of the conversation that doesn't end with you sounding totally unsure or like an intolerant bigot.

It's like being a licensed deer hunter who gets invited as a +1 to a dinner with about 50 people. And 10 minutes into the dinner you discover it's a PETA fundraiser. And you are thinking..."yeah...i love bambi too. He is delicious!" But you aren't saying it and you hope you aren't asked! Because how offensive would that be to everyone in the room. That's often how a Christian feels when a conversation turns to religion. You don't want to be seen as "One of *those people*."

Not only that, people will turn to religion and say it is the biggest reason we can't get peace on earth. Religious fanatics, who believe they are right and everyone else is an infidel, are the ones fueling the global threat of terrorism. People therefore believe that exclusive religious claims lead to violence in the name of that religion.

And it may surprise you to hear me as a pastor say that I agree! Religion actually *can* create a slippery slope in the heart. Your religion tells you that you have the truth and those that don't believe like you don't have the truth. So you live by a standard others don't live by and you begin to, whether you mean to or not, begin to look down on people who don't believe like you do. You start to separate from them, and that separation leads to unfamiliarity which leads to dehumanization. Which then makes you feel ok about being violent towards that person or group of people.

What I want to show you today is show you why the gospel of Jesus Christ isn't at all like that. I want to show you why I believe the gospel, when rightly understood, is actually the most humble, inclusive, peace-loving worldview ever put forward in human history. To get there I want to do 3 things.

- 1st: Lay out, very clearly, the core of the Christian message for us. Sometimes objections to the Christian message are based on misunderstandings about it. So let's get clear on it. That won't take too long.

- 2nd: Give what I hope will be reasonable, rational answers to the most common two or three objections people have to the "Jesus is the only way" claim. This is where we'll really dive into the man on the island scene.
- 3rd: Show you a very important implication of this whole thing for all of us.

We are going to do all of that in one sermon which means this will go rather quickly.

Part 1: The Gospel Message

Alright so I grew up in the south. Right here in the bible belt. And that means the most influential religion on the culture was Christianity. It's like somebody shot a bible confetti cannon all over the southeast and BECAUSE of that, just about anyone can pick up a piece or two and from there make assumptions about the whole thing. I can't tell you how many times I've heard silly to outright crazy stuff average Joe thinks Christians believe:

- In the bible it says 'cleanliness is next to godliness.' – No... it doesn't. Anywhere. Now college guys that doesn't free you from bathing. It's good wisdom to clean yourself.
- I just can't believe Jesus re-appeared in North America – Me neither. That's Mormonism.
- God says he helps those who help themselves – No! Benjamin Franklin said that in poor Richard's almanac. But God says specifically the exact opposite. He helps those who cannot help themselves!

There are many other crazy things out there so I want to get clear on it and to do that I'm going to walk you down what some Christians refer to as the Roman Road. Perhaps the most theologically rich book in the whole bible is the apostle Paul's letter to the Church in Rome. And in that letter he lays out very clearly the core of the Christian faith. So as you walk through Romans, you get a clear and crisp picture of what we Christians believe. I'm going to give you the brief 5 stop tour of the book and won't charge you anything.

[7] To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Romans 1:7

You have to understand the starting place for Christians in our message is that we believe God created the world and that he loves you. And you may think...yeah but isn't that verse just talking about his love for the church? Yes it is. But God's love is never limited to that. In fact Jesus is going to say for God so loved "THE WORLD" that he gave his only son. And a little bit later down the Roman Road in chapter 5, which we will look at in a second, Paul is going to say that the whole story of Jesus...his life, death, and resurrection...was all a gift from God to every person BECAUSE he LOVES US. Everyone. Massively important.

1. God loves **ALL** people, and that includes you.

I say it because some of you in here feel you are too broken, too stained, to be loved by God. Spence if you only knew my past, you'd know there is no hope for me. NOT TRUE! God loves you! And as we looked at last

week there is no height too high or depth too deep that can separate you from God's love in Jesus. You say your past makes you unworthy and to that I say Impossible. Because God is bigger than you. Infinitely bigger. And his love is infinitely greater than your brokenness. God loves you. The whole message of Christianity, the thing that fuels the rest of it, the foundational starting block is that there is a God who personally cares for you, hurts when you hurt, and has a desire for you to know him.

That leads us to the second stop on the Roman Road and it can be found in Romans 3:23 [23] for **all** have sinned and fall short of the glory of God Romans 3:23

This is a big thought here. God loves ALL of us. And, ALL of us have sinned. Every Single Human. This is a core belief of Christianity that some people will side step but there is no way around it. Christians believe in Right and Wrong. We believe it because everything in our own experience shows us that a right and wrong beyond ourselves must exist. Regardless of your religion you probably believe molesting children is wrong, & that protecting children is right. That exploiting the poor for profit is wrong and caring for the poor is right. That Kale is WRONG and Krispy Kreme is right. I just lost some of you. So sorry.

Kidding aside, We all believe in universal right and universal wrong and Christians simply claim that God is the one who sets that right and wrong. That is a rational belief, it has to come from somewhere outside ourselves,

and I encourage you to listen to our first sermon in this series for a more in depth look at that.

We believe in right and wrong. Anytime we do wrong, that is what the bible calls sin. And we all do it.

2. **ALL** people have sinned, and that includes you.

And if we weren't in church and you and I were just sitting at a table talking, I think you'd probably agree to this.

Yes, I've done something intentionally wrong at some point in my life. It's the one thing we don't have to teach our kids. I gotta teach them everything else. But no one taught my four kids to say "MINE!" No one taught my kid to write Boo MOM on the inside ceiling of my car and then when I ask about how it got there no one taught them to lie and say "I don't know." It's in our nature! We ARE SINNERS BY NATURE AND BY ACTION. You don't grow out of that, you just get better at it and better at hiding it. But you are a sinner.

So what do we do about this sin problem? After all God is a God of justice right? So like with any law, if broken then justice must be served. Otherwise he isn't a good God.

That leads us to stop #3.

[23] **For the wages of sin is death...**Romans 6:23

The story of the bible tells the story of the human race and its relationship to God. God is perfect & without sin. And when we sin that sin separates us from a holy and perfect God. It corrupts our relationship with him. He is perfect and Perfection cannot co-exist with imperfection.

Which means yes, one sin corrupts our relationship with him.

God talks about his relationship with people like a marriage.

Courtney – me 98% faithful. That's a GIANT PROBLEM.

That's what sin does to our relationship to God. Corrupts the whole thing and separates us from God. Perfection cannot co-exist with imperfection.

See Paul here says the "wages" of sin.. The thing your sin earns you...is death. God is life, to be separated from God means to no longer have life. separation from God means physical and spiritual death.

3. Because ALL have sinned, ALL are separated from God, including you.

I want to pause here and say to our non-christian friends here that if you are hearing this for the first time, I once heard it for the first time also. And for me my reaction was a mixture of offended and openness. So if you are feeling like this is offensive, that's ok. I promise I am only the messenger relaying the bible to you. And its going to get better, then worse, then better today. My challenge to you is to really consider it. Ok let's keep going. Only 2 more stops and they are filled with good news

[23] For the wages of sin is death, **but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.** Romans 6:23

If you picked up on it you observed two seemingly conflicting characteristics of God in the Roman Road. He LOVES YOU and at the same time, HE IS JUST. In his LOVE he desires to spare you from the death you owe for your sin, but his justice means he can't let sin go unpunished. So his answer was to send his only son. His son who lived a perfect life so that he didn't have any sins of his own to die for...to die for your sins. So Jesus takes on your sin and covers you with his righteousness.

4. The gift of God available to ALL sinners is forgiveness from sin made possible by the death of Jesus
It's often called the great exchange. You are forgiven of your debt that you owed. Because he paid it! We who were separated from God are now restored to him! Jesus gets your death you get God. You can't earn it. You can't do enough things to make God save you. It's a gift that you can receive. That's Grace. God's Righteousness at Christ's Expense.

That's everything for Christians. And the last stop is ok if this is all true, how do I receive this free gift of salvation?
That's Romans 10.9-10

[9] because, if you confess with your mouth that **Jesus is Lord** and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. [10] For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. Romans 10:9-10

This is different from every other religion. Every other religion says to earn heaven, to earn righteousness or good standing you must work for it. And Christianity says

no you cannot earn it. But you can receive it from the Lord. Confess...it isn't an incantation or chant, its not a magic password. A confession is the verbalizing of a soul level conviction. Jesus is Lord...which means he died for my sins because only the Lord, perfect and holy, could do that. Confess you need the salvation of the Lord and then receive it. He is Lord, you are not, and you receive it.

5. ALL people must repent of their sins and receive the salvation Jesus offers to be saved

In that confession lies the claim to the exclusivity of Christ, but you needed to see it inside of the overall message of the gospel. We are all sinners...we are all separated from God...we all need help...and Jesus is the way. In fact, Jesus himself says he is the only way:

[6] ...“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. John 14:6

The only way. No other way. Which brings us back again to the man on the island. There are the two big problems, maybe three, that people have with this exclusive claim that Jesus is the only way.

1. Claiming there is only one way to God is arrogant
Upon hearing the gospel you may say “come on man, you can't be arrogant enough to assume you are right and every other religion is wrong!” How arrogant is that. The man on the island grew up muslim or Buddhist. Why can't his way work for him and your way work for you? Underneath this is an assumption that all religions are

basically equal. We worship the same God and just perceive him different ways.

Leslie Newbigin was a Christian missionary to India and a brilliant writer. He kept trying to share the gospel and kept getting met with...sure Jesus can be your god, but that doesn't make other God's less valuable. And then he'd be told a parable. One he heard dozens of times. And thanks to him, you've probably heard it to as its made it from him into western christian teaching. The parable aims to show that no one has a full grasp of God. three Blind men were walking along and came upon an elephant that allowed them to touch and feel it. The first man grabbed the elephant's trunk and said "the elephant is long and flexible like a snake." The second blind man said "not at all!" an elephant is large and flat like a wall. He was touching the elephant's side. The third man says "YOU ARE BOTH WRONG. An elephant is thick and round like a tree trunk." He was grabbing the elephant's leg. Each blind man could feel only part of the elephant so none could envision the whole thing. And so the parable teaches the religions of the world have a grasp on part of the truth about spiritual reality but none can see the whole elephant or claim a full understanding of God.

Ya'll if I were to say that to a group of people around a random tailgate today, I bet most of them would agree with that. And Newbigin said after hearing it time after time he realized the parable has a HUGE fatal flaw. The story is told by someone who is not blind! How could you know that each blind man only sees part of the elephant unless you claim to be able to see the whole elephant!?

The only way you could know that all religions can only see part of the truth is to conclude YOU can see the whole truth. Turns out what has a veil of humility & tolerance "no one can know everything" is actually INCREDIBLY arrogant and intolerant.

Point: when you say no one has a superior take on spiritual reality, you are imperialistic & exclusive! You are doing the very thing you say no one else can do!

Another way to say it: it is no more narrow minded to claim that one religion is right than it is to claim that all religions are right. See everyone believes something about the reality of the world and life beyond it.

You have to choose.... Who defines what reality is? Is it the world system who says that all religions are equal? Is it you... do you get to decide and pick your own reality? Or is it Jesus? ¹

Whatever you choose, you will be someone's infidel. The world calls *me* an infidel because I won't submit to the reigning viewpoint that all religions are equal. But the one thing Jesus will **not** be is one among many. He won't let you put Him in your pantheon of gods. He's either Lord of all or not Lord at all, and you can't call Him Lord and deny Him on this matter. **You have to choose, are you sticking with the world or with Jesus?** Whoever you choose, you'll be the other one's infidel.

¹ From J.D. Greear's message "how can there only be one way to God?" in the Why I'm Not a Christian series preached at Summit Church in 2008.

I'll be honest with you... Part of the reason I think people don't like to even entertain the idea that there might be one right way is that if there is one way then they themselves have to submit to it. They don't want to be told what to do so they hide behind this "all religions are equal" so they can decide what way they want to go in life. That's a choice you have to make.

And that's where the second objection comes in:

2. Claiming there is only one way to God is cruel

I had a deep discussion with my wife about this. "It seems like God wouldn't put the guy on the island and never give him a chance to be saved. Because that doesn't seem fair. That seems cruel." Ok let's ask: is the man on the island innocent from sin? Well, we'd say no. Everyone is guilty of sin. Everyone knows right and wrong. And the bible even goes so far as to say everyone is aware of God and suppresses the truth about their need for him:

Romans 1:19-23

[19] For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. [20] For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. [21] For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. [22] Claiming to be wise, they became fools, [23] and exchanged the glory of the immortal God

for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. (ESV)

In other words, ALL people are in a state of rejecting God and turning to false religions and false idols to save them. The man on the island is a sinner, the man on the island is worshipping a false God. So does the man on the island need salvation from his sin!? Yes! And God has decreed there is only one way for him to have that salvation: Jesus.

And you may want to jump up in arms thinking HOW ARROGANT! To which I say, not at all. Because I'm not claiming to be smart enough or valuable enough to have attained this knowledge. I've been given it. It's a gift. The only religion that says you can stop trying to earn your way to God. Yet you still say "but how is that FAIR that you could hear about Jesus and receive forgiveness and not the man on the island?"

If you are asking that question: you are believing something about yourself and all mankind. And that is, you believe that people are Good enough that God owes each of us an opportunity to receive his gift of salvation. But that doesn't seem to square with everything we've said up to this point. God doesn't owe anybody anything. After all he is God.

If we are indeed all sinners then God the fact that he rescues any us, at the cost of his only son, is sheer mercy. And here's why this question really gets to you: It's not just about the man on the island. It's about you and those closest to you. If you, or the people you know, don't put their faith in Christ for their salvation from their sins...what will happen to them? And the very

uncomfortable answer to that is that they will spend eternity apart from God.

And if you think, how cruel of me to say that, “this is the problem with religion. It divides people like this.” I want us to remember something:

Everyone has an exclusive faith claim they live by. Whatever that is for you, some adhere to it and others don't.

The Gospel did not produce division, it destroyed it. No longer would our race, our culture, our backgrounds, even our morality distinguish us from others.

The Greeks and Romans would not mix rich and poor. The Christians did. The Romans and the Jews would not mix races. Christians did. The Gospel produced the most inclusive community the world had ever known.

Why? Ultimate reality for the Christian is a Man on the cross loving people who don't love Him. Giving himself for people who didn't agree with him. Study Acts and you'll see new classes and castes of people mixing together... you'll see people giving away their money in unheard of ways!

(Church, that's why this is the one place there should be diversity!) In this room we'll have together the morally upstanding and the moral failures; we'll have the black and the white... all united praising God because **it didn't matter what kind of sinners we were it mattered what kind of Savior He is.**

If your belief in the Gospel ever causes you to feel superior... confess: sometimes it does. We think we are accepted because we are smarter, or more moral...

When it does, it shows we have no concept of the Gospel.

The point: Everybody has an exclusive view of what is good and bad. You separate the good from the bad, the enlightened from the unenlightened... The question is which set of exclusive beliefs produce the most peace-loving, inclusive attitude toward humanity... and **it is the Gospel!**

Christianity is exclusive, but it is the most inclusive exclusivity there is.²

I want to close by showing you what our response to all of this should be:

1) **Belief** – Some of you need to believe the gospel. You are hearing it today and you are not a Christian. You are not the man on the island. You are now informed. You've heard. And maybe you never heard before today but God has ordained TODAY to be the day. Don't delay. We had a guy last week, 83 years young, who came to Christ because he finally responded to the Lord calling him to himself. Don't wait another week. Nabeel Qureshi – Died yesterday. 34 years old. Wrote a book called Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus. In that book he talked about his journey from devout muslim to devout Christian. And he said it was incredibly incredibly hard because he loved

² Excellent “inclusive exclusivity” insight from both Keller's Reason for God and Greear's sermon “How can there only be one way?” I used Greear's wording on the main point, but I am deeply indebted to both for making this so clear to me.

his muslim faith and he knew it would cause his family great pain. When he came to Matthew 10.37 it said basically he has to love God more than father or mother. And he said "But Jesus, accepting you would be like dying. I will have to give up everything. And the next verses read

[38] And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. [39] Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. "Matthew 10:38-39

He said that was it. That's where he connected Jesus' death to his own. It will cost you your life and once you give that up, then you will find true life.

2) **Go & Tell** – This whole letter to the Romans...it's a plea for them to help him get to the man on the island. Because he knows the only hope for the man on the island is a boat with a Christian in it. Here's what he says:

[13] For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." [14] How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? [15] And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!" ... [17] So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ. Romans 10:13-17

We've said this for some time at our church. Who is someone far from God but close to you? HOW WILL THEY HEAR unless you go tell them? How will the man

on the island hear? There are 6,000 people groups...6k who've never heard. And as the reality of their lostness sets in on you let me say this is why we go. And if you are after all of this skeptical...at least you'll appreciate the consistency.

Pen from Pen & Teller – He's an atheist but in a recent video he shot after a show he talked about how a guy walked up to him, asked if he could give him a bible and share his story. Very polite. Pen says yes and guy shares the gospel with him and Pen says "I didn't believe like he did, but I thanked him. Because if its true that Jesus is the only way, that man did the most loving thing he could do in telling me." That's what we are doing here. We may be fools, but we are fools for Christ's sake and we love you. And we beg you, come to Jesus.