



Series: It's Hard to Believe

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Title: Jesus is the Only Way?

Introduction

Today we begin a six-part sermon series called It's Hard to Believe.

The idea behind this series is to speak to some of the common obstacles or questions people have when it comes to believing in Christianity. By the way, these come from eight years as your pastor. I have heard these from you and walked with different ones of you through different ones of these questions.

You lose somebody you love and man you start doubting God is good or even real. You make a new friend who doesn't believe what you believe and you start thinking "how can Jesus be the only way when this person who doesn't believe in Him is so great?" You read a headline about a church leader abusing somebody and you think - is the bible telling me THEY are right and my transgender friend is wrong?

Most Christians, if they are honest, have some doubts or questions about certain aspects of their faith that just don't

make sense to them. Alvin Plantinga says "There is an unbeliever within the heart of every Christian."¹ **"It isn't necessarily the strength of the arguments that rattles us, but the way they resonate with the unbeliever in each of us."**²

It's common for people to see doubt as a brick wall that keeps them from belief - they'd like to believe but get stopped dead in their tracks by what feels like the immovable wall of doubt.... In this series I want to show you that doubt isn't a wall, but instead a door. It has hinges and a handle that you can actually use to pull that door open to enter into the house of faith. What you think is a barrier, is actually the very thing God will use to draw you to Himself.

So, we are taking 6 weeks to open some doors together. If you aren't a Christian I think this is a great series of sermons for you. Regardless of where you are in your faith, if you are new to Mercy we invite you to stick it out for these next 6 weeks. It takes about that long to figure out if a church is right for you. Sometimes you know the first week if it's wrong for you. I

¹ Alvin Plantinga, "Christian Philosophy at the End of the Twentieth Century," in *The Analytic Atheist: An Alvin Plantinga Reader*, ed. James F. Sennett (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998). 336.

² Stokes, Mitch. *A Shot of Faith (to the Head): Be a Confident Believer in an Age of Cranky Atheists*. Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2012.



invite you to get into a community group where we will explore these questions in more depth.

By the way the goal here is not to ELIMINATE all forms of doubt. Doubt is actually too broad a word. Because there is honest doubt and dishonest doubt. Honest doubt is saying “I can't seem to understand, so I'm investigating.” Dishonest doubt says “I've already made up my mind and I'm looking for ways to discredit you.” For the honest doubters, my hope is to provide you tools and some answers to help you in your investigation of the faith. For dishonest doubters, my hope is to show you the love of God for you. I think love is what you need more than anything. In fact that leads me to...

Last thing I need to say before we get going and it's about the tone we want to set here. **We are not out to be combative.** The tone of this series is truth in love. I'm going to address some common questions and try to show you God's better way. But I'm not trying to WIN an argument. Christian, I'm not trying to equip you to WIN an argument. I'm trying to give you tools for the mission of God to reach the lost with Christ's love.

Today we look at the idea that the rest of the sermons will build on. In a word the problem is Exclusivity. The problem in a statement often goes like this: **“It's hard to believe there's only one 'right' religion.”** Non-Christian friends will say why can't Jesus just be good for you and not for me?

Man on the Island

This problem is often presented as 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!? Is GOD going to send him to hell because he never heard of Jesus? Tough one right?

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 - the idea there is absolute and singular truth, is so offensive in present-day that as Christians it's 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.

People will turn to religion and say SEE, this is why we can't get peace on earth. Religious fanatics, who believe they are right and everyone else is an infidel, are the problem. So the conclusion is drawn by secular society 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 hatred towards or even being violent towards that person or group of people. But here's the thing. The tragic irony of that very view led ATHEISTS to commit horrible atrocities in the 20th century. Alister McGrath said in his *history of atheism*:

The 20th century gave rise to one of the greatest and most distressing paradoxes of human history: that the greatest intolerance and violence of that century were practiced by those who believed that religion caused intolerance and violence.

Talking about Communist China & Soviet Russia. In other words, the idea that the world is getting better and religious belief is something we need to grow beyond, didn't hold up.

AND I want to show you today why the gospel of Jesus Christ isn't at all like that. I want to show you why I believe the gospel actually announces the most humble, inclusive,

peace-loving worldview ever put forward in human history. To get there I want to do 3 things.

1. Get us on the same page about what Christians believe
2. Show how Christianity is the most inclusive religion the world has ever known.
3. Call us to take a next step.

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

Part 1: The Gospel Message

Ok let's start with what Christians actually believe. 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!

Now, next week we'll get more into why we can trust the bible as the word of God. And we've got Dr. Michael Kruger preaching for us which will be awesome. This week I am telling you what Christians actually believe, ok. And to do that I'm going to show you one verse that captures the story all of scripture tells. And intentionally this is a very familiar one to Christians and I'm trying to call us back to the center of our faith. Here is the gospel in a verse:

16 For God loved the world in this way: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. -- John 3:16 (CSB)

Listen some of you came in here today and you weren't expecting a dive into such a hard question and I get that. Usually we just walk through a passage of scripture. Well, this is all you need today. It's really all any of us need.

God loves you. "The world" is the whole world. God loves you. God loves me. God loves your friend. God loves the man on the island. The Christian message is first and foremost the announcement that we do in fact believe there is a God and that He loves the people he made.

His love is not just a feeling, because love is not just a feeling. Love is expressed in action and God acted by giving His one and only son. That's Jesus Christ. The only son of God the father. He gave His son to the world He loves. That gift was sacrificial and it was for the purpose of saving people who were bound for death because of something called sin.

This is a big thought here. God loves ALL of us. And, yet despite that love 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, and 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.

We all believe in universal right and universal wrong and Christians simply claim that there is a God who sets that right and wrong. That is a rational belief, it has to come from somewhere outside ourselves. Anytime we do wrong, that is what the bible calls sin. And we all do it.

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.

You are, I am, and **so is the man on the island**. This is why I believe in Christianity. It makes room for people to fall short of who they are supposed to be. It makes room for sin so that we don't have to be hypocrites. We often are, but we don't have to be. We can just be the flawed sinners we are.

And because Christians have such a high view of God - that He is HOLY and JUST - God says sin must be paid for. Like a crime, justice must be delivered.

And the heart of God shown in the bible is that God chose, instead of condemning the world for its sin...He chose instead to send a Savior. For all peoples.

See when you think about the man on the island it's easy to think Christianity is out to condemn the world for not believing like it does. And I'm trying to show you the heart of God is the complete opposite. In fact the next verse says

For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. -- John 3:17

If I could summarize the entire storyline of the bible in a sentence it would be simply this...and our folks who took our how to study the bible class already know what I'm about to say....

**The Gospel Message:
God the father sent His son to save sinners He loves.**

He loves you, He loves me, He loves the man on the island. We are all sinners and we all deserve judgment for our sin but God. Oh but God. Sent His son to save sinners.

I say it because some of you here feel you are too broken, too stained, to be loved by God. Pastor Spence if you only knew my past, you'd know there is no hope for me. Listen, even if you are IN IT right now. Came in here today with the stain of sin still fresh on you from last night. I'm telling you GOD's love is greater and it is for you. Here's the way I've heard it described.

The announcement of the gospel is that **you are actually more wicked than you ever realized**. You think your sin is bad? It's actually worse. It also has eternal consequences. But, at the same time you are more loved than you ever thought possible.



God the father loves you so much He sent his son to save you, to save me, and to save the man on the island. That's point one. It is your sin that condemns you, it is God's love that saves us.

Now, point two in our sermon. **Christianity is the most inclusive religion in the world.** Back to our man on the island.

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 the **effect** of all religions is basically equal.

Either they are equal in terms of all roads leading to the same God OR they are equally valuable in the benefit they offer mankind. Peace, purpose, etc. Listen THAT is the argument against Christianity by what is called the secular worldview. Which prizes relativity. Secular meaning the *supposedly* non-religious worldview. I say supposedly because what I want to show you is that secularism is in fact a religion. And a far more exclusive one than Christianity. Let me explain.

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 Gods 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 too as it's 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 CAN SEE! 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.

The Secular Argument: Claiming absolute truth is arrogant
The Secular Absolute Truth: Truth is relative to the individual

While the secular world tries to position itself as the non-religious option in the menu of religions, it is actually the most arrogant of them all because it claims YOU, a single individual person, have the authority of God - the authority to determine truth.

When you say no one has THE right answer, you are the exclusive one! You are doing the very thing you say no one else can do!

So, you have to choose.... Who defines what reality is? Is it the secular gospel who says that all religions are equal and truth is relative? In other words is it you... do you get to decide reality? Or is it Jesus? ³

³ 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.

Now we gotta return to our man on the island one more time. Because there should still be something still lingering - the question of fairness.
“But how is it 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 what God gives to some He therefore OWES to all. 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 scripture. Are we OWED forgiveness for our sin? No. God doesn’t owe anybody anything. After all He is God.

If we are indeed all sinners then the fact that God rescues any of 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 the bible gives 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.

Your view of truth, whatever it is, excludes people. Because all worldviews exclude people. If you say truth is relative you actually EXCLUDE the man on the island who completely denies what you believe about Him.

What makes Christianity so uniquely powerful is that it goes to extraordinary lengths to INCLUDE all peoples. Even the worst of sinners.

Christianity sees sin like a sickness and the gospel as the antidote. And so, those who have been made well want to tell those who haven't. We can't make you take the medicine anymore than we can take a horse to water and make it drink. But at least Christianity says all people are worthy of the gospel and it comes at no cost to ourselves.

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 people of all backgrounds... all united praising God because **it doesn't matter what kind of sinners we are, it matters what kind of Savior He is.**

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.⁴

Which leads us to point 3 of our sermon. Our next steps:

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.

2) **Go & Tell** – The Bible announces good news and sends us who have heard about it out to others....In the book of Romans the apostle Paul talks about the man on the island. Because he knows the only hope for the man on the island is a Christian being sent to him. 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

⁴ 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.

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 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 it’s 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.

PRAY