

Is Christianity Too Narrow?

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Preacher: Rev. Jonathan St. Clair

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Today's scripture reading from the book of Exodus, chapters 19, verse 2 through 8, chapter 20, verses 1 through 3, and chapter 24, verses 7 through 11, as printed in the liturgy.

After they set out from Rephidim, they entered the desert of Sinai, and Israel camped there in the desert in front of the mountain. Then Moses went up to God, and the Lord called to him from the mountain and said, This is what you are to say to the descendants of Jacob, and what you are to tell the people of Israel.

You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession.

Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites. So Moses went back and summoned the elders of the people and set before them all the words the Lord had commanded him to speak.

[1 : 30] The people all responded together, We will do everything the Lord has said. So Moses brought their answer back to the Lord. And God spoke all these words, I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

You shall have no other gods before me. Then he took the book of the covenant and read it to the people. They responded, We will do everything the Lord has said. We will obey. Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people, and said, This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words.

Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the 70 elders of Israel went up and saw the God of Israel. Under his feet was something like a pavement made of lapis lazuli, as bright blue as the sky. But God did not raise his hand against these leaders of the Israelites. They saw God, and they ate and drank. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Well, good morning to you all. We are now at the midway point in this Explore God journey that we've been taking over seven weeks. This is week four.

[2 : 38] And we've explored various questions. Does God exist? Does life have a purpose? Why does God allow pain and suffering? And today we come to this question, Is Christianity too narrow?

Is Christianity too narrow? So I took my dictionary, and I looked up this word narrow, and other words came up. Confined, cramped, tight, closed, pinched, and squeezed.

And so then I, you know, went to my thesaurus, and I looked up narrow in the thesaurus, and it said words like these. Narrow-minded, intolerant, illiberal, reactionary, conservative, conventional, parochial, provincial, insular, myopic, blinkered, inward-looking, inflexible, dogmatic, rigid, entrenched, prejudiced, and bigoted.

And those are like the worst criticisms you could possibly make of anyone in our society today. Amen? Like how many of us would like to be called any of those things?

Right? We're educated people. We're cosmopolitan people. We like to think of ourselves as broad-minded people living in this pluralistic, diverse, equal, and inclusive society.

[3 : 59] So how many of us really want to be called illiberal or intolerant or even bigoted? It's not really what you hope people will say in your obituary or at your eulogy.

You know, Jonathan St. Clair was, of all the people I've ever known, the most narrow person I've ever met in my life. So the question is, will Christianity make me narrow? And if so, I want to have nothing to do with it. Now why do we say that increasingly in our Western secular culture? The reason we say that is because our deepest value is freedom and liberty, which we define as the absence of constraints.

And you see, there's already, there's all of a sudden a problem because any absolute truth claim is by definition constraining and therefore seen as the enemy of freedom.

Any doctrine, any ethic that would limit my options or rule out alternatives or restrict or keep me from thinking and living the way that I want must be narrow.

[5 : 05] Right? And so we look at the doctrinal and moral boundaries of Christianity. And we look at the way that Christianity names certain beliefs as heresy and certain practices as immoral.

We look at the way that Christianity includes or excludes its members based on their creed and their conduct. And we say, yuck. I don't want that. Christianity seems to narrow my options, limit my liberty, constrain my freedom, and cramp my style.

So no thank you. And it's true that when you look at the Christian community with its set boundaries, you can look at that and you can say, well, if Christianity bars people from its community, that seems to endanger civic freedom.

That seems to kind of divide rather than unite. Or if Christianity fails to affirm various cultures and their different perspectives on truth and reality, that seems to be culturally narrow.

Or if Christianity determines what its members must believe and practice down in the particulars, that seems to enslave and infantilize its members. And some people look at Christianity and say, this really threatens to stifle our creativity, to stifle our growth, it stifles our ability to think for ourselves and determine the truth for ourselves.

[6 : 31] Maybe you believe this. Maybe you know people who believe this. 20th century social activist Emma Goldman wrote this. She said, Christianity is the leveler of the human race.

It's the breaker of man's will to dare and to do. It's an iron net, a straitjacket, which does not let him expand and grow.

So that's the question before us. Is Christianity narrow? Is it this iron net, this straitjacket? Is Christianity the enemy of our freedom? The enemy of social cohesion and cultural adaptability and authentic personhood?

And I want to address these questions through this foundational event in the book of Exodus. What we just read is that the center of that book, literarily and theologically, you have these recently enslaved but newly liberated slaves.

And the people of Israel, they go and they get these words of truth from God at Mount Sinai in Exodus 19. And then God gives to them these 10 words, these 10 commands in chapter 20.

[7 : 43] And then he gives them this book of the covenant, these case laws in the next several chapters. And then he seals his covenant with them in Exodus chapter 24. And the average modern person looks at this and says, well, this is a problem.

Surely at this stage in history, we need to get beyond religions that are based upon absolute doctrinal truth and universal ethical laws. But what I hope to show you in the next few minutes is that Christianity's commitment to doctrinal truth and to the moral law is not the enemy of freedom. But it's actually the basis for freedom. It's the ground note of freedom. And I hope I can demonstrate that to you. And if I'm not satisfactory, come to our Q&A; and you can grill me afterwards.

I'd love to talk with you about it. But here's what we're going to explore. We're going to look at the wideness of grace, the narrowness of love, and the fullness of the covenant.

I'm going to explore in this text the wideness of grace, the narrowness of love, and the fullness of the covenant. Let's think about the wideness of grace for a moment.

[8 : 58] If you look at Exodus 19, verses 4 and 5, it says God is speaking. And the most important words in the book to this point, he says this in verse 4.

You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession.

These words of God himself show us that the starting point of Christianity is not narrow laws, but it's wide grace.

There's a widespread assumption that if God is there at all, he wants us to follow his rules. And in order to find credibility with God and acceptance with God, then we need to behave ourselves and get our lives together and follow the rules and obey his laws.

And if we do that, then we'll get into his good graces. Then we'll win the love of God for us. But notice what God says first. The very first thing he says is, I carried you on eagles' wings.

[10:09] I want you to imagine an eagle with outstretched wings that can soar at great heights and can go at incredible speed over long distances.

And the image here is of this eagle who looks down and sees his helpless or her helpless fledglings that cannot fly. And they're being attacked.

They're in trouble. There's some predator that's coming after them. And so the eagle just, what does he do? The eagle swoops down to the rescue and carries its young off to safety.

And what do those little fledglings contribute to this moment of salvation? What did they contribute to their deliverance? The point is they contributed nothing. The eagle did everything.

And God says, I've already saved you. I've carried you on eagles' wings. By my infinite grace, I brought you to myself.

[11:13] Now obey. I've completely accepted you. Therefore, obey. You see, every other religion and every human heart operates on pretty much the opposite principle.

I need to obey God. I need to do right and live right. And then I'll be accepted. Then I'll be blessed. Which I agree with you. That is narrow. That's narrow. But Christianity, at the heart of Christianity, is this God who says, I have carried you.

I have saved you. I have delivered you. Now obey. And that, I want to argue, is a very wide expression of the grace of God to us.

It's not obey, then I will do these things for you. God did not give them the law in order to deliver them, but he delivered them, and then he gives them the law.

And what that means is that your belief in divine truth or your practice of the moral law has nothing to do with God saving you. It has nothing to do with God setting his love on you and accepting you and carrying you and bringing you to himself.

[12:24] Whatever you do is a response to the prior action of God on your behalf. So the default mode of the human heart is to completely reverse this order.

And it says that, you know, if there's a God, we have to prove our worth to him. We have to earn his acceptance and work hard for his blessing. But if you notice in the story, the people of Israel were doing nothing.

They were miserable slaves and sufferers and sinners there in Egypt, hopeless and helpless, little baby birds, little eaglets who couldn't fly.

But God, with his wide wings of grace, swoops down and carries them off.

So the laws that are going to follow in this story are not the condition of the relationship. They're the confirmation of the relationship. We do not obey God in order to be saved.

[13:28] We obey God in order to live in a manner that's worthy of the great salvation we've received. Friends, the God of grace at the heart of Christianity is not narrow.

And when we interpret being in a relationship with this wise creator and this gracious redeemer as something oppressive and withering to our humanity, rather than liberating and life-giving to our humanity, we are the ones who are being narrow and not God.

When we resist the grace of God and all of its wideness, what we're really doing is we're choosing the narrowness of our own self-sufficiency.

And ironically, we're excluding ourselves from God's incredibly inclusive grace, this God who wants to carry us and bring us to himself.

So that's where we need to start today is, have you experienced the grace of God? Has the grace of God come in and swooped down and picked you up and carried you off and brought you to himself?

[14:41] Because that is the starting point. And it's really the continuing principle and the ending point of Christianity. It's all about the wideness of the grace of God.

You tracking with me so far? So we talked about the wideness of God's grace, but we do need to talk about the narrowness of love. The narrowness of love.

Look at verse 5. It says, God says, Now there's that pesky little word, obey.

Submit. Conform. That's what feels narrow. That's what feels like that iron net and that straitjacket that will not allow us to expand and to grow, that threatens our freedom and our authentic personhood.

But how many of you have ever fallen in love with another person? How many? Oh, like not enough. Not enough. Okay. Now I know how to pray for you. If you've ever fallen head over heels in love for another person, what do you want?

[16:04] You want to figure out how to please that person. Right? You start to do your research. Like what makes her tick? And what's going to delight her?

What's going to please her? What does she most deeply want? And then you go and you give it to her. Here's the trick, guys. Without being asked. Without even being told sometimes.

You know? Now when you do that, you know, it actually doesn't feel like duty. It feels like delight. You don't feel coerced. You feel constrained by love to place your happiness and your joy into the happiness and joy of that other person so that their being happy and their being joyful is your happiness and your joy.

So that the more you see your beloved delighted and fulfilled, the more it fulfills you and the more you want to serve them, the more you want to get below them and get out in front of them and do things for them.

Has anyone ever known that kind of love that made you do crazy things? So why does God say, obey me so that I can treasure you? Well, it can't mean so that I can accept you because we just saw he already has done that, right?

[17:23] I carried you and brought you to myself by my grace. That's done. You see, in Exodus 20, when he starts the Ten Commandments, he doesn't go straight into the law. He starts out and he says, I'm the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

And why does he say that first? Because what he's saying there is, I'm your lover. And I've done everything in this love relationship to get it going.

I listened to the deepest needs of your heart. I heard you crying out in pain and agony in Egypt. I saw you in your misery and oppression and slavery.

And I swooped down and I came to the rescue. And I carried you on eagle's wings and brought you to myself by my grace. And now I want you to reciprocate. I'm about to show you my law.

And here in my law is everything that I love, everything I desire, everything I value. All that delights me and pleases me is right here. And what's the first foundational principle that God gives in his law?

[18:30] Before, don't steal or don't lie or don't hate or don't lust. What does God say? He says, don't have any other gods before me. I don't want you to have anything more central than me or more important than me in your life.

Obey me, he says, so that I can treasure you. Now the treasure in the ancient Near East, this word for treasure is the private wealth of the king.

The king had special certain objects of beauty and value that were his exclusively by right.

Think of the crown jewels. This is the personal possession of the king. He kept it in his room. And he would delight in these things in a special and a higher way.

And what God is saying here is he's saying, I already love you. I've already carried you by my grace, but now I want you to obey me so that we can have a relationship of intimacy and mutual delight so that you can know you're my treasure.

[19:38] You're my crown jewel. Now this is an incredible offer, but it comes at a cost. It comes with strings, doesn't it? Look, my wife on the day that we were married and every day since then, a thousand times a day, I know that Catherine is saying to me, look, you can enjoy an authentic love relationship with me, but here's the deal.

I want nothing and no one to compete with me. I want to have your exclusive loyalty. I want to have your wholehearted, uncompromising commitment.

Now, how many of you here think that Catherine is being narrow? How many of you think she's being unreasonable? Isn't that just the basic prerequisite for having a romance, for having a healthy marriage?

God says, obey me because I want to treasure you. But he goes beyond that and he says, not only do I want to treasure you, I have greater desires even than that.

He says, I want to make you my treasured possession. And then he says, I want to make you into a holy nation. I want to make you a nation that is holy. What does that mean?

[21 : 04] Well, to be holy means to be set apart, to be separate and distinct. And God is saying to his people in this moment, he's saying, I want you to function as an alternate society, a radical counterculture, a community that operates on a completely different operating principle than all the other communities around you.

And when you go and read the laws in the Torah, you can see there that the way the people of God are to deal with sex and money and power, they're to use these things in non-destructive, non-exploitative, non-addictive ways.

So, sex, for example. Israel was the first culture where adultery was seen not just as a sin for women but for men. And men would be held responsible and held accountable for whatever part they have in that.

So, it's completely revolutionary. Sons in Israel weren't the only people that could inherit the family's wealth and riches. Daughters could inherit it as well.

A completely different kind of approach to sex. When it came to money, all the people of God were required to give 10% of their income as an offering to share with their community.

[22 : 25] And beyond that, they were to care for widows and orphans and the needy with their own resources. Sex, money, there's power. The aliens and immigrants and racial outsiders among you, God says, they're to have the same rights and same privileges that you do.

Because, remember, you were aliens in Egypt and you know exactly what that's like. You see, when it comes to sex and money and power, you, my people, are to be this radically chaste, radically generous, radically just counterculture.

And modern people look at that and they critique Christianity as narrow, as something that puts a limit on their personal growth and potential.

Because it constrains our freedom to choose our own beliefs and practices. And we argue that it's this kind of freedom to determine our own standards that's necessary for being a full human being. But I want to argue for a moment that freedom should not be defined in strictly negative terms. In many cases, we all know that confinement and constraint is actually the means to liberation.

[23 : 46] If you have a talent, you discipline that talent. You put a limitation on yourself in order to unleash your ability that would otherwise go untapped.

You deliberately lose your freedom to engage in some things in order to release yourself to a richer kind of freedom to accomplish other things.

Some of you are musicians. Some of you are incredible academics and incredible athletes. You know what it means to lose some of your freedoms over here in order to gain other freedoms over here.

Freedom is not so much the absence of constraints and restrictions as finding the right ones. Finding the most liberating restrictions.

See, the laws of God in Exodus 20 to 23 are full of his humanitarian concerns. About the oppressed, the elderly, animals, the environment, enemies, immigrants, widows, orphans, and the poor.

[24 : 50] If you don't believe me, go home and read it this afternoon. All of these laws were given to shape our social conscience. To teach us how to maintain the dignity of our neighbor.

How to protect the worth of human life. How to uphold justice and maintain trust in our society. How to protect basic rights and well-being, particularly the most vulnerable people.

The most disadvantaged and powerless people from discrimination and exploitation and oppression and abuse. And what I want to argue with you today is not that any of this stuff is narrow.

But that the book that we're talking about today, Exodus and the whole Bible, is really... It is the legal and moral foundation for all the freedom and equality and humanitarianism that all of us love in the Western world.

If you don't believe that, let's talk about it at Q&A.; But it's why the center frees over our Supreme Court in the United States has who? Moses holding this law that's telling us everything that God loves.

[26 : 04] And all the freedom losses that we need to experience in order to become full and truly free human beings. Modern people say, well, I don't want to be a part of a community that has such a high ethical vision.

And such strong moral standards because that feels narrow. But friends, the law of God is there to draw us into an intimate relationship with God. And to mold us into this beautiful, radically unique, different, life-giving human community that God defines as holy.

And holiness is not narrowness. Holiness is allowing your heart and allowing your life to be expanded by the priorities and purposes of God.

Holiness is allowing your soul to be enlarged by the character of God and the will of God, which is so much bigger than us. God says, if you obey me, you'll be my treasured possession in a holy nation.

And this is my simple invitation to you to experience this most liberating freedom loss that you can imagine.

[27 : 20] You will lose some of your independence in order to gain a greater intimacy with the living God. And this is how we truly become more fully human and more free to become more fully ourselves, who God made us to be.

The psalmist says in Psalm 119, he says, I run in the path of your commands for you have set my heart free. I love the paradox of that.

Just chew on that. I run in the path of your commands for you have set my heart free. That's the narrowness of love.

And you're never going to have love if you're not willing to submit to all the narrowness of love. So there's a wideness of grace. There's a narrowness of love.

But finally, I want to talk about the fullness of the covenant. The fullness of the covenant. God says, I want you to be three things. I want you to be my treasured possession.

[28 : 27] I want you to be a holy nation. I want you to be a kingdom of priests. And what's the job of a priest? A priest is somebody who brings people into the presence of God. Somebody who enables people to see God and experience God.

It's someone who mediates the blessings of God to other people. And God says, I want you, my people, my people collectively and corporately. I want you to mediate my presence and my blessings to all the nations.

I want you to be the light to the world. So that when people see you and they see your life, they'll see me and they'll see my life. And how do the people respond to this incredible invitation?

It says in chapter 24, verse 7. Then Moses took the book of the covenant. He read it to the people and they responded, we will do everything the Lord has said.

We will obey. The unanimous pledge of allegiance. They say together, not our will, but your will be done, Lord. And what happens next?

[29 : 32] It says in verse 8, Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, this is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words.

They didn't live in a written culture. They lived in an oral and dramatic culture. So they didn't ratify a contract on paper. They would act out the covenant.

They would act out the penalty of breaking this covenant. So that when Moses is spraying the people with blood, they're all saying together, if we don't do all that we just promised to do, may our blood be shed.

May we be cut off. May we die. And then what happens next is that in verses 9 through 11, when Moses and the elders of the people go up as representatives of the people, they go up the mountain and it says they see God.

They don't see the face of God. They don't see the fullness of the glory and the majesty of God. But what they see, they're grasping for words. They say, we saw something like, they're trying to describe it.

[30 : 35] They see the foundation of God's throne. They see the pavement under God's feet. And even this to them is breathtaking and ineffable.

And it says after that that they ate and they drank with the high king of heaven. This is the blessing of being in a covenant relationship with God.

The hospitality of God brings us home. And he feeds us at his table as his royal family. And he enables us to enjoy friendship and intimacy with him in his presence.

And you may be wondering, like, how is this happening? How in the world is this possible? The first command God gave is that you should have nothing of greater importance than me.

But if you read the Old Testament, clearly the people of God think there are things that are more important than God. They're breaking this law all the time. So how does this work? You see, Jesus Christ, on the night before his cross, he sat at table with his friends.

[31 : 44] And he took a cup and he lifted it up to his friends that knew this story of Exodus and Exodus 19 to 24 extremely well. And what did he say to them? He said, this is the blood of the covenant.

This cup is the new covenant in my blood. And what does Jesus mean when he says that? See, in that moment, Jesus Christ, who is the almighty and eternal God, who in the most radical way narrowed himself and came down and constrained himself and submitted himself and conformed himself to us in his incarnation, this same God of Mount Sinai who came down to us in Jesus Christ as a limited human being and submitted himself to our condition and became vulnerable to suffering and death.

He's saying, this is the blood that I'm going to shed on my cross as the substitute for all of your failures to obey God's law.

This is the blood that's going to cover up your shame. This is the blood that's going to cleanse your guilt. Jesus on his cross, he got all the curses of that covenant so that we could get all of the blessings.

And that's incredible because Jesus is God's perfect covenant partner. Jesus is the only human being who fully obeyed God. The reward he deserves is to see God and to experience the blessing of God.

[33 : 20] What we deserve is to have our blood shed for all of our self-centeredness and our pride and our biting and devouring one another, all of our violence, all of our putting ourselves first and not loving God and disobeying his law.

But you see, Jesus doesn't give us what we deserve. Jesus takes our place and he gets all that we deserve so that we take his place and get all that he deserves.

Friends, Jesus went to the cross as this priest so that he could bring us into the very presence of God. He could bring us home to God and give us access to the throne of God and enable us to experience the hospitality of God and to feast at the table of God and to be the royal family of God and to have friendship and intimacy with God.

So if at this point you're still thinking Christianity is narrow, I want to assure you, you don't yet understand it. You just don't yet understand it. Jesus Christ did not think it too narrow to give up all of his eternal rights and infinite privileges and all of the benefits of heaven and all the benefits of his obedience to sacrifice all of that and all of himself for us.

So that when we see what Jesus did for us, nothing anymore seems too narrow for us to do for him.

[34 : 57] This is why the Apostle Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5, he says, the love of Christ constrains us. The love of Christ constrains us, he says.

Once you realize how Jesus Christ gave himself up for you, you're no longer afraid of giving up your freedom and therefore finding your freedom in him.

And I want to close with these provocative words from Jesus himself in the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew chapter 7. I want you to think about this.

He says, this is the most loving human being that's ever lived. The most gracious person who's ever walked planet Earth. He says, enter through the narrow gate.

For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction. And many enter through it. But small is the gate. And narrow the road that leads to life.

[36 : 01] And only a few find it. And I pray that you would find it. And walk that road. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen. Amen.