

The Exclusivity Problem

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 17 June 2018

Preacher: Tad Inboden

[0 : 00] Amen. Will you please pray with me? Father, we pray, Lord, that you would open up our hearts to hear your word tonight, that you would help us embrace the exclusive truth claims of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and that you would help us share the gospel with a spirit of humility and love and respect.

In your precious name, amen. Amen. Well, good morning, everyone. I'm so glad to be here. For those of you who don't know who I am, my name is Tad Inboden, and I am one of the directors of student ministries here at St. John's.

I work with my wife, Nicole, and we are expecting, it's very exciting, in July, we're having a little baby girl. We're very excited, so I seem to be a father. So, now, some of you may know me, however, from CCQ.

How many of you went to CCQ? Oh, quite a lot of you. That's great. So, for those of you who don't know what CCQ was or is, it was an evangelism workshop that the church put together in February, and it was there that we, together, as a congregation, as a community, tackled some of the toughest questions and objections that people have against Christianity.

And it was in that section and all the conversations that burgeoned from it that inspired this new series that we're doing called The Problem of Christianity.

[1 : 37] And as we saw in CCQ, when Christianity gets brought up in conversation, it doesn't take long before someone to say, Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, I get that.

That's all well and good. But, you know, the real problem with Christianity is blank. And then they go on to fill in what they believe is the biggest problem of Christianity for them.

And now these problems are full of vast range of kind of emotional responses and attachments of these problems, ranging from anger to confusion to frustration.

And then these problems then serve as a barrier to belief in Christianity for people. Now, there's a number of problems. There's the problem, for example, of God himself.

People cannot get over the fact that God is wrathful and judgmental. They want a loving God, a graceful God only. There's the problem of pain and suffering.

[2 : 47] It's traditionally posed like this. How can an all-good and all-loving God, an all-powerful God, allow evil, pointless evil to exist?

And how can he simply let innocent people suffer? Then there's the problem of hypocrisy of Christians, the record of Christians throughout the centuries.

There's the problem of the historical reliability of the Bible. There's the problem of the incompatibility of science and faith. And, of course, there's the problem of sexuality.

And the list could go on and on and on. And here's the thing. It's not just unbelievers who wrestle with these questions and find them unsettling. Many, many Christians struggle to simply answer these questions.

And they often feel ill-equipped to discuss them with non-Christians. This is why we are doing this series. We want to tackle some of the biggest objections and problems people have against Christianity so that we as a community can be better equipped to think through them on the one hand and then talk about them without fear and intimidation.

[4 : 11] So today, what we are going to be looking at is the problem of exclusivity. The problem of exclusivity. So with this brief introduction in mind of the series, what we are now going to do is something a little bit different than what you're normally used to.

So what we are going to do first is explore the dynamics and anatomy of the problem of exclusivity. So we're going to set the problem of exclusivity in its cultural context first.

And then what we are going to do is move to exposition and see what Matthew 7 has to teach us on the problem of exclusivity. Is that okay?

Okay. Okay. Now, here we go. First, the problem of exclusivity. When we are dealing with the problem of exclusivity, we need to understand that what bothers people are two things.

The first thing is the exclusive beliefs of Christianity. The exclusive beliefs. The second thing is the exclusive or what some people call intolerant behaviors of Christianity that flow out of those exclusive beliefs.

[5 : 33] So beliefs and behaviors. So we'll take one at a time. First, beliefs. Mark Clark, in his book, he's a pastor of the Village Church.

He wrote a book called *The Problem of God*. It just won a whole bunch of awards. He said it is the central claim of Christianity that is maybe the most controversial in modern times.

And we all know what that claim is. It's the claim that Jesus alone connects humankind back to God. In John 14, we all know this passage.

Jesus says, I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. Now, that is a bold claim.

And as Ravi Zacharias points out in his book, *Jesus Among Other Gods*, he says that it's a claim that Jesus alone is the exclusive means of salvation.

[6 : 30] The only way to have peace and ultimate joy in life. And that no other religion and no other worldview can provide these things.

But this is a serious problem. It is a serious problem for people living in our culture. A lot of Western people, and including a lot of Christians, find it extremely offensive to claim that there is only one way to God.

God. The reason? It appears arrogant, narrow-minded, and exclusive. Why is this the case? It's the case because we live in what Leslie Newbigin, in his book, *A Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*, he says we live in a pluralistic society.

There's the reality of cultural pluralism. It's a reality. It's a fact. So what this is, is we're globally connected, aware of literally billions and billions of other good, decent people who practice different religions, have different worldviews.

And in addition to that, in addition to the reality of cultural pluralism, there is the ideal, and our culture upholds ideological pluralism, or what most people call inclusivism.

[7 : 53] And we hold this as a supreme value in our culture. And this is what it says. This is what the belief says. It says that we must all accept as true and valid all ideas, convictions, and worldviews of different people and different religions.

And so in this cultural climate, when people encounter Christianity's exclusive claims, they can't help but ask themselves this question. How could Christians honestly say that all people, Jews, Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, even atheists, secular people, how could you say that all of them are wrong and are going to be in eternity without God just because they don't belong to Christianity? How many of you have watched Oprah? You don't need to show a hand. No need to show a hand. But how many of you have watched Oprah? I personally love Oprah.

I know she doesn't do her show anymore, but she did. My mom loved Oprah, so I kind of watched it. Now, I looked on YouTube and found this very interesting dialogue that Oprah had.

It was a very heated dialogue, actually. Oprah had with a Christian in her audience who said, the Christian stood up and said, you know, Jesus is the only way to God.

[9 : 25] And I believe that Oprah summarized so well the frustration most people feel towards a belief that is so exclusive. Here's what she said in her show.

You can watch this on YouTube. She says this, there are millions of ways to be a human being and many paths to what you call God.

Her path might be something else and when she gets there, she might call it the light. There couldn't possibly be just one way.

You see, the belief that Jesus is the only way to God is seen by many as arrogant and exclusive truth claim that marginalizes and devalues other people's authentic quest for spirituality.

Do you see? So, in addition to this, in addition to this, not only are Christian beliefs seen as arrogant, it's also believed that Christianity's teaching on the exclusivity of Christ leads to behaviors that are intolerant on many levels and oppressive and even borderline violent.

[10:44] If you, we're looking for a good book on this. I'm just constantly going to recommend books so you can write them down. Mierschlof Wolf, Exclusion and Embrace is a phenomenal book on the dynamics and anatomy of exclusion, the practice of exclusion.

It's not, it doesn't take long for critics like Richard Dawkins and other people in the New Atheist Movement to say the Crusades, bring up the Crusades, or the African American slave trade, or the treatment of Christians toward the LGBTQ community.

And when these examples are then put right up against other perpetrators of religious violence like ISIS or the Christian missionary treatment of Aboriginal people in this country, it seems hard for our culture to escape the conclusion that religion is one of the greatest obstacles to tolerance and peace in our world.

I've experienced this personally. Before I came to St. John's, I was at Regent, I was doing two degrees, and on the second degree, the THM, I was writing a paper on reconciliation with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, how the gospel plays into that.

And I was working with a team to church plant on a reserve. And someone caught wind of this, came up to me, and said, listen, these people do not need your religion.

[12:04] They don't need Christianity. They don't need to be saved. Their religion is beautiful. Their culture is flourishing. And what they need is for you to leave them alone.

She saw me as exclusive, holding these exclusive beliefs, and she just naturally assumed, although this was the exact opposite case of what happened, that I was just imposing or forcing or coercing and oppressing these people with my beliefs.

Now, here's what I want to do. I want to wholeheartedly affirm certain things, okay? I believe that Christians should uphold and affirm that there is much truth and beauty and virtue in other cultures and religions.

C.S. Lewis, in his book, Mere Christianity, makes this point. He says, if you're a Christian, you don't have to believe religions and other religions and other cultures are wrong all the way through.

He says, you can see that there's glimpses of truth in each one of them. We're allowed to do that as Christians. And I think that a Christian needs to admit the terrible fact that the church has never lacked in truly arrogant people, older brothers, so to speak.

[13:22] And I also agree that exclusive religious beliefs to superiority can erode peace and lead to strife and conflict and division. This is what Tim Keller in his book, The Reason for God, calls the slippery slope of religion.

Ah, yes! But, and this is a very big but, the reality is that we cannot avoid truth claims.

No matter what the postmodernist says, no matter how convincing the critique of metanarrative and absolute truth is, the reality is we cannot avoid truth claims.

Everyone has truth claims. And by their very nature, by the very nature of truth, truth claims are exclusive. And all religions, and really all people, even the pluralists and the relativists, they all make exclusive truth claims.

So, then the question becomes, which truth claims lead to intolerance? Does this make sense? So, this is, as I see it, the heart of the problem of exclusivity.

[14:43] Christians are told that it is arrogant to believe that Jesus is the only way to God and that this leads to intolerance and oppression towards other people.

But is that true? Is it true? Does holding the exclusive belief that Jesus is the only way to God, does it necessarily lead to intolerance and oppression towards other people?

I personally do not believe it does. I believe it does. But I do not believe it does. And what I want to propose to you today is that Christianity has the unique power to break the chains of arrogance and intolerance that bind the human heart and to generate an openness of vastness of breadth and a depth and a humility to treat others who are different than us, who believe different things than us with love and respect.

This is because, this is my thesis, at its very core, the exclusive claims of Christianity are about the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

Now let me show you what I mean from our passage. Here we go. In our passage for today, as some very wise young adults pointed out to me in our Ecclesia ministry, they pointed out that Jesus directly confronts this kind of baseline cultural narrative that we all assume is true of the religious pluralist that says there are many paths to God and that all good and sincere people will eventually find him in the end.

[16 : 23] It's Oprah's belief. He says no. Jesus says no. Actually not. There are not several paths to God. In reality, there's only two.

All spiritual findings break into two categories or two roads or two paths. He says this, that the one way is narrow and the other way is wide.

Now this should shock us. It should shock us because normally in the scriptures, the word for narrow usually has negative associations and references while the word wide has very positive associations and references.

But it's funny, Jesus uses the narrow way or the narrow word to describe the wrong way. But he uses the wide word to describe the wrong way. Now in your translations, it says the hard way, right, and the easy way.

Now other translations like the NIV talk about the wide way and the narrow way. And this is because in the original Greek, the word means narrow, actually.

[17 : 31] That word translated hard means narrow. And what it literally means is to be compressed or squashed or crushed. Do you understand?

And it means for wide, it's the word for spacious and vast. But what's even more shocking is where Jesus says that each path leads. He says that each path leads to two destinations.

He says that the broad way leads to destruction while the narrow way leads to life. What is Jesus saying here? What is he saying?

He's saying, in effect, that the broad way is the way to narrowness and the narrow way is the way to spaciousness. What he is saying is that the thing that looks superficially very spacious actually leads to suffocating deadly narrowness.

And the thing that looks superficially incredibly narrow and suffocating actually leads to incredible vastness and breadth and freedom. There's this movie, Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, and in that movie, they're in the Triwizard Tournament.

[18 : 46] Or not the Triwizard Tournament, yeah, they do that. But there's at the Critics World's Cup, and Harry Potter is with the Weasley family. And the Weasley family sets up this little itty-bitty tent. Okay?

And they all start to go in. Right? And Harry's looking at them like, how are they all fitting in this tent? And on the outside, the tent looked very, very small and narrow and cramped. But then Harry enters in and what does he see?

It's like an entire house. There's a kitchen table. There's something roasting on the fire. There's chairs to lounge around in. You see, the point is, the tent as seen on the outside and the inside are two different places.

You see, what Jesus is saying is that the gospel on the outside looks incredibly small and cramped and narrow. But when you get inside, it's spacious and leads to more and more vastness.

But alternatives to the gospel, while on the outside they look incredibly broad, incredibly spacious, they actually lead to suffocation and death by narrowness.

[19 : 50] So how can this be? How can narrowness lead to spaciousness and spaciousness lead to narrowness? Here's how.

If you believe that the only way to be saved is through Jesus, that's narrow. It really is narrow. But it's the only way to believe in grace.

If you believe you are saved by grace, you have to believe that someone else has fought and won the gate for you. That's how you can just enter the gate. Jesus says, enter the narrow gate.

He doesn't say in verse 14, hard is the way and narrow is the gate that leads to life. He says, narrow is the gate and then comes the way.

Do you know what Jesus is saying here? Because this is very, very, it's key in this discussion of exclusivity. He says this, that all other religions and all other worldviews, in the end, they end up saying this.

[20 : 55] They say, try hard. Live a good life. Be a good person. Be sincere and authentic in your beliefs. Follow the rules. Fight the fight.

And then, and then, you will be saved. That's what the pluralist, in the end, is actually saying. But Christianity says, no, be saved first and then out of that, live a good life and love other people.

In other words, other religions and worldviews say, first the road and then the gate. They say, hard is the way, but then you enter the gate of salvation. But Christianity says, enter the gate now.

Why? Why does it say that? Because in John 10, 9, Jesus says, I am the gate. I am the gate. I live the perfect life that you couldn't live.

I fought the fight you couldn't fight. I went on the hard way. I was the one who won that gate for you. I died outside the gate so that you could come in and have a relationship with God.

[22 : 02] You could have life and have it to the full. You see, whereas broad-minded people, people on the wide way, say, you don't have to believe in Jesus. All good and sincere people, you know, can find God in the end.

And that's very broad-sounding. It's very broad-sounding. It sounds very inclusive and tolerant. But what it actually means, sorry, when you boil down to it, what it actually means is that you are saved by your works.

That's what Christians believe. The doctrine is. And when people say, I don't believe in absolute truth, I don't believe in doctrine, none of that matters. What matters is that you live a good life, believe whatever you want as long as you're sincere.

Do you know, that's a doctrine. That's an exclusive truth claim. And it's a certain kind of narrowness. It is a fundamental belief on which they are building their life on.

And you see, Christians at least know that they're narrow. They at least know that there's a narrowness about the gospel. You see, but on the opposite side, they are also narrow.

[23 : 11] But they don't know that they're narrow. You see, all people, this is all people on the Broadway. I've been on the Broadway, so I understand it. This kind of gradual, it's true for all people on this road, the gradual narrowness.

This is true for the irreligious person as well as the religious person, the relativist and the moralist, all people on the Broadway. Why?

Because at its core, it's a self-salvation path rooted in our own pride and our own works. And you cannot help but be arrogant and exclusive towards people who don't believe what you believe.

So, when the religious person who builds their life on their works, who trust in their own wisdom, their own abilities, and their own moral goodness, says, you know, what makes me special, baby, is that I have the truth.

Do you see? That can lead to feeling superior to other people and exclusive towards them who don't hold your belief. But the pluralist who also builds their life on their works, who trust in their own wisdom and ability and their open-minded beliefs, says, you know, what makes me special is that I know that there is no absolute truth.

[24 : 30] And everyone is free to be who they choose to be can be just as prideful and superior and exclusive towards people who think that there is truth or who doesn't believe their truth.

You see what has happened. Your broadness has led to a kind of narrowness. And it's almost a blind narrowness. But the Christian who has been willing at the outset to be narrow and say that I am saved by grace, that someone else has won the gate for me, has a spaciousness of not feeling superior to other people who hold different beliefs and they're not crushed when people criticize them or disagree with them.

Why? Because this, a true follower of Jesus believes in the exclusive truth that the almighty God came down from heaven to serve us and to die for us so that we could be saved.

And this is the key. Not by our right beliefs. Not by our right behaviors. But by the sheer gift of unmerited grace.

So the Christian cannot look down on others. They can't be intolerant and they can't be exclusive. The true Christians, Jesus says, can only be intolerant to the extent that they misunderstand the gospel.

[25 : 53] And what is the gospel? It's a man who gave his life for people who did not believe in him. A man who died asking for forgiveness for people who were willing to kill him. So when Christians say, I believe the gospel, they say, I have the truth.

But you understand that the truth that I have is a suffering God. A lamb that was slain, do you understand? The one who died for his enemies.

The one who came not to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many. So friends, Christianity is indeed exclusive truth claim.

But it wants, and here's the thing, it's the most inclusive, exclusive claim because it wants you to exclusively believe in a God who died for you while you were still a sinner.

And he asks you to love and care for people who are different than you. So friends, I believe that Christians can indeed be arrogant and intolerant.

[26 : 51] They can act in intolerant and arrogant ways towards others. But this is not believed because they, I don't believe this is because they're taking Jesus' exclusive claims too seriously.

I actually think it's because they are not taking Jesus' exclusive claims seriously enough. So, how does this work out in practice, in closing?

How does this actually work out? How can we actually share the great truth of the gospel without being arrogant and intolerant? Here's what I think it looks like.

It looks like being vulnerable with other people about our own weaknesses and our own brokenness. I was talking to a woman in this congregation.

I love this woman so much. Her heart, oh, it's so full of grace and love. And here's what she told me when we were talking about this topic. She says, when I was younger, I was raising children.

[27 : 51] And now my children are all adults, but I was raising children. And during that time, my inner life was one of crippling anxiety and worry. I worried about what was happening to my children, what was happening in their life, and I worried about the future.

But her strategy of trying to control her own life and those she loved, she says, was a complete failure. But into that place of messiness and of pain and of failure, Jesus entered into her life. and giving over that messiness, that troubled life to her was a very slow process. It took the help of this community and Christian friends and brothers and sisters to help her.

And she has learned to trust God with herself and her family. This is a daily process for her. But she says, with God, like anything else, I found true peace.

And do you know what she says? She says, when I share the gospel, this is exactly what I tell people. This is the story that I tell people. I found that so amazing, so encouraging.

[29 : 01] Because I can talk about my failures all day long and my sins and my hang up, but how good God is. You see, again and again, admitting our own failure and simply being vulnerable about our weakness and our great ways to be non-arrogant witnesses to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Amen. Amen.