Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. And this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming; and now it is already in the world.

Little children, you are from God, and have conquered them; for the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. They are from the world; therefore what they say is from the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us, and whoever is not from God does not listen to us. From this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. (I John 4:1-12, New Revised Standard Version)

Some of you know that I and a few friends climbed Mount Shasta two summers ago. It was an amazing, but grueling nine-hour climb up the southwest face of the mountain. Our particular route took us through Hidden Valley, up the West Face Gully, past Misery Hill, and on to the summit. It was the hardest climb of my life. But well worth it. The view from the top was indescribable.

As it happened that day, we didn’t see a single other person the whole way up. That is until we got to the very top, where we met two men who had come up a completely different route on the southeast face. As our two groups compared notes, it became clear that we had climbed the same mountain, and were now standing on the exact same place at the summit, but our journeys to the top had been very, very different.

Understand that this is how a lot of people these days see faith and religion.

Think about it this way. If this mountain represents our journey to know God, a popular view in our culture says that there are many paths leading up this mountain which will, in the end, get you to the same summit. Yes, Christianity is one of those paths. But so is Islam, and Hinduism, and Mormonism, and Judaism, and the list goes on. These paths, it’s said, overlap at times. At other times they cover very different landscape. But in the end they each lead to the same summit. They each lead to God.

In a magazine interview, Madonna spoke for many others when she said, “I do believe that all paths lead to God. It’s a shame that we end up having religious wars, because so many of the messages are the same.” Oprah Winfrey, who influences millions of people with her spiritual views, has recently said: “One of the mistakes that human beings make is believing that there is only one way to live… I’m a free-thinking Christian who believes in my way, but I don’t believe it’s the only way, with 6 billion people on the planet.”

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Everywhere you turn these days, you hear this perspective. Even in churches, you’ll find people who will say, “While Jesus may be one path to God, there are many other equally valid paths to God. Therefore, it is offensive and arrogant when Christians are so exclusive in their claims that Jesus is the only way to God.”

Now, it may surprise some of you to hear that a part of me is sympathetic to this perspective. The fact is, I can’t deny that there are countless examples of how the Christian message has been used to divide, and to subject, and to wage war, and to make others feel inferior. I’ve seen it up close, where Christianity is used like a sledge hammer: “We’re right. You’re wrong. Jesus is the only way. And if you know what’s good for you, you’ll get on board.”

Frankly, there are times when I’ve been embarrassed and saddened by the way I have heard the Gospel presented. There have been times when I have wished certain Christians I’ve met would just keep their views to themselves. In America we live in the most religiously diverse nation in the world. And when some Christians go around with that sort of superior attitude, it’s no wonder that all Christians get labeled as closed-minded, arrogant and exclusive.

That being said, however, it is stunning to me how masses of people these days swallow whole this “many paths” perspective of life without ever really thinking it through. There are millions of people in our culture, some of them in churches, who share this perspective. And yet, is that really what they believe?

Do Madonna and Oprah really believe that all religions lead to the same place and teach the same thing? What about the ancient Incas who practiced child sacrifice to appease the gods? What about the radical Muslim terrorists who flew planes into the Twin Towers on 9/11, sincerely believing their actions would lead them to paradise? These are paths which some people passionately believe lead up the mountain to God. But do any of us really believe that those paths are equally valid ways to God? I hardly think so.

And if, then, you say, “Well, I don’t mean that all paths lead up the mountain. What I mean is that there are many paths up the mountain.” Well, then, how do you determine which paths lead to God and which paths don’t? Who, exactly, gets to draw that line?

Part of the way some people answer these questions is to say that the major world religions, at least, all lead to the same God. That because they have stood the test of time, and because they have millions of followers, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism and Christianity are all equally valid paths. And furthermore, as the argument goes, these religions lead to the same place because, in essence, they all teach just about the same thing.

Let me put it bluntly. The only people who claim that all these religions teach the same thing are people who don’t really know what these religions teach in the first place. Because, you see, at their core, the major religions of the world teach radically different things about the nature of God, about salvation, about heaven, and so on.

What tricks people, I think, is that these different faiths do, on the surface, share some things in common. For example, Jesus teaches to “do to others as you would have them do to you.”3 Well, Buddha teaches just about the same thing when he says, “Consider others as yourself.”4 And it’s not uncommon to find this principle of loving others in most, if not all, major world religions. I’d be the first one here today to agree that there is truth to be found in most every religion.

But dig a little deeper. Because while it’s true that Buddhists may share the Golden Rule with Christians, there are also stark differences between these two faiths. For one, Buddhists don’t even claim that there is a god. And though Buddhists don’t deny that Jesus existed, they don’t see that he was necessarily any more important than any of the rest of us.

Hindus, as you may know, believe that there are thousands of gods from which we can choose. Jews believe in one God, of course, but they deny that Jesus Christ was God. Muslims also believe in one God, but they believe that this God is

4 Dhammapada 10:1, as quoted in Kimball, p. 180.
one who only saves people whose good deeds in life outweigh their bad deeds in life. Christians, of course, believe God saves us not by good works, but by grace, through Jesus Christ.\(^5\)

I like the way writer Dan Kimball explains this. He says the mountain actually looks like this. At the base of the mountain, these different paths, in many instances, do share the same ground. They teach a lot the same things: love your neighbor, take care of the poor, there is life after death. But as you climb higher we begin to see that these paths go in entirely different directions. These paths, in fact, lead ultimately to different mountaintops altogether.\(^6\)

Now understand, to this point I have not said a thing about which path is right and which path is wrong. I’m just making clear that we simply cannot say that all these paths lead to the same God. They don’t. For logically, there cannot be a God who, at the same time, is one God, but also a thousand gods, but also doesn’t even exist in the first place. God cannot, at the same time, save us all by grace, but also require us all to be saved by our good works. Jesus cannot, at the same time be God but also not be God. And to claim otherwise is nonsense.

In light of all this, I want to be very clear this morning and come right out and say that Christianity does, in fact, make the claim that the path it marks off up the mountain is the one true path. Again, Christianity doesn’t say that there isn’t some truth to be found in other religions and other perspectives. Of course, there is. What Christianity says is that ultimate truth is found only in Jesus Christ. Christianity says that Jesus is, ultimately, the only path to God.

Remember that the very first of the 10 Commandments says, “You shall have no other gods before me.”\(^7\) At the very heart of Old Testament law is the claim that there is just one God we are to worship. In 1st Kings, Elijah shouts to God, “Answer me, O Lord, answer me, so these people will know that you, O Lord, are God,” and not these other gods!\(^8\) In the early church, Acts records Peter preaching these words, “Salvation is found in no one else [but Jesus Christ], for there is no other name under heaven given to [the world] by which we must be saved.”\(^9\) In the passage we read earlier, John warns his readers that anybody who does not acknowledge that Jesus Christ is from God is not speaking the truth of God.\(^10\) And of course, Jesus himself put it plainly when he said, “I am the way. I am the life. I am the truth. No one comes to the Father but through me.”\(^11\)

The scriptures are resoundingly clear from cover to cover that there is just one God, and that we know this God through Jesus his only Son, and that, in the end, Jesus is the only path that leads to God.\(^12\)

But why is that, some of you may ask? Perhaps some of you have wondered why the Bible is so insistent that people can’t come to God unless they come through Jesus. Well, the answer is simply this. Human beings are separated from God by our sin. We’re not on top of the mountain with God because we have, each of us, decided that we want to live life apart from God. But God, because of his deep love for us, found a way to bring us back to him by sending his Son to die and be raised again so that if we put our faith in Christ, our sin is forgiven and we are saved by God’s grace.

Now, the Muslim says that we overcome our sin by our own good deeds in life. The Buddhist doesn’t see sin as a problem, but only ignorance, which can be overcome through progressive meditation on Buddhist principles. The Hindu agrees and says our problem is just ignorance, which can ultimately be overcome as we are reincarnated over and over again and eventually absorbed into the Universal Soul.

As you can see, these are radically different views of sin and salvation. And over and against these others views, Christianity says that these other paths will not lead to salvation because they do not solve, they cannot solve, the problem of human sin. That problem, again, can only be solved by the grace of God through Jesus Christ. This is, whether you agree with it or not, what Christianity teaches, and has always taught.

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6 Kimball, p. 181.

7 See Exodus 20:3.

8 Specifically, Baal. See I Kings 18:37.

9 Acts 4:12.


12 Of course, whether you believe the scriptures or not at this point is another question altogether.
And that means that when people accuse Christianity of being exclusive, their accusations are accurate. Let’s just be honest about it. Christianity is exclusive towards other truth claims. It says that Jesus is the only path that leads all the way up the mountain. But understand something. Christianity is far from being the only exclusive truth claim out there. And this is a huge mistake that many, many people make.

Muslims radically claim exclusivity. Muslims believe the path to God is not by grace, but by good works alone. They believe that the Koran, the revelations of Muhammad, supersedes all previous writings, including the Bible. Hinduism is also absolutely uncompromising on certain issues, including the law of karma and reincarnation. They say this is how it works for everybody, not just Hindus. Followers of Judaism claim, without any shades of gray, that Jesus Christ was not the messiah and does not offer salvation. In saying so, they exclude the message which says that Jesus was God. They say that message has no stake in the truth.

Ironically, even Oprah and Madonna, and others like them who protest against exclusive truth claims and promote the “many paths” to God viewpoint, even they hold, themselves, an exclusive perspective. You see, they believe that this picture of the mountain with many paths leading to the top is the way things really are. And they say that those who hold a different view of life and of God are simply wrong and that their message cannot be included in what is truth. In some ways, theirs is the most exclusive viewpoint out there because it tells the vast majority of the world – Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists – that they’ve all got it wrong. What on the surface is meant to sound so inclusive is actually incredibly exclusive.

Can you see the hypocrisy? Or at least can you see the irony? As one writer put it, “Skeptics believe that any exclusive claims to a superior knowledge of spiritual reality cannot be true. But this objection is itself an [exclusive claim].” In one way or another, all of us, Oprah and Madonna included, are exclusive in our beliefs about God and faith.

So where does that leave us? Here we are, all of us, each saying that we understand the way up the mountain. So many claims. So many paths.

Well, we find ourselves, in reality, at the base of a range of mountains with a decision to make. And in the valley there are all these different trails leading off up the mountain, each with a different name, and each promising to lead us to the summit. To God. To ultimate truth.

Our task, then, is to weigh our options. Our job, if we are wise, is to think carefully about these different paths. To study and to reason. To compare. To seek. To look at the maps. To talk to people who claim to have traveled these different trails. We’re foolish, I think, if we just listen to the hiker who comes along and flippantly says, “Hey, it doesn’t matter what trail you take. They all lead to the same place anyway.” No, we must not accept that. Because as we investigate we will learn from the maps, and from those who have traveled on these paths, that each path actually leads to a very different summit.

This is why I am always going to encourage us as a church to seek hard after the truth. For I believe that anybody who seeks after the truth with – and this is key! - an open mind, an open heart, and a teachable spirit will, in the end, find the truth. The scriptures tell us as much. God says in Jeremiah 29:13, “You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.” Jesus himself said, “Seek and you shall find. Knock and the door will be opened to you.” In the passage we read earlier, John encourages us, “Do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God.” These are weighty questions with eternal implications. We must give them our careful, heartfelt consideration.

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15 Theologian Ravi Zacharias puts it this way: “[Truth] is, by definition, exclusive…If truth does not exclude, then no assertion of a truth is being made; it’s just an opinion that is being stated. Any time you make a truth claim, you mean something contrary to it is false. Truth excludes the opposite…To deny the exclusive nature of truth is to make a truth claim, and is that person then not arrogant too?” Quoted in Strobel, p. 149-50.
16 Matthew 7:7.
17 I John 4:1.
I’ve told my own children already that I clearly believe that Jesus is the only path we have been given to God. And to this point, they take me at my word. But they are young. And I know that as they grow up they will be presented with other paths. And so I’ve also told them that they will have to weigh these things carefully. They can’t just believe something simply because mom and dad believe it. In the end, each of them, like each of us, has to choose a path in life.

But I do believe that anybody, my kids included, who sincerely searches for the truth about God and life will find that truth. And the truth they discover will be found in Jesus Christ.

Now, before I close, I want to address one other question which many of us have asked. If Jesus Christ is, in fact, the only way to God, what happens to people who never even get to hear the message of Jesus? Are those people just out of luck?

Now, this is a delicate question. And in trying to answer it, we have to proceed with great humility, great caution, and careful consideration.

Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth and the life, nobody comes to God except through me.” But notice something. Jesus doesn’t say that he knows the way. Or that he shows us the way. He doesn’t say that Christianity is the way. Or that the church is the way. Or that believing certain things or reciting certain creeds is the way. He says, specifically, that he is the way. Jesus, himself, is the way.

This is where I’ve come down on this question. Does a person have to be a Christian or be a part of a church to get into God’s kingdom? Does a person have to say, at some point in their life, that they believe Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior to be saved?

In the end, I don’t think so. For one, followers of God in the Old Testament like Abraham and Moses were not Christians. They were not part of the church. They never even knew the name of Jesus. And yet we know – the Bible tells us so – that they are included in heaven.

And what about the man today who is growing up in a rural village in the middle of Afghanistan, deeply embedded in a culture where the only faith he ever really knows is Islam. And though he hears about Jesus, never once in his whole life does he ever hear an accurate presentation of who Jesus really is and what Jesus really did. He can’t trust the message of Christ because he’s never even heard the message of Christ. He can’t join a church because there is no church where he lives. He can’t recite a Christian creed because he has no idea what that a Christian creed would include.

Do we say that man is doomed simply because, as a result of unfortunate geography, he never found the one, true path? With all I know about the nature of God, I just can’t believe that God doesn’t take specific circumstances into consideration when he judges a life like that. Or any life, for that matter.

Along these lines, Jesus once said something very, very interesting. In Luke 12, Jesus is teaching his disciples about the final judgment and he makes this statement. He says, “From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.” The implied flip side is, of course, that from the one who has been given little, much less will be expected or demanded from that person.

At the end of our lives, when you and I stand before the judgment of God, what excuse will we have? We have lived at a time and in a place where most all of us have heard, time and time again, the good news of Jesus Christ. We have received the truth. We have been given much. And much, in turn, will be expected. God will say to us: “You had the truth. What did you do with it?”

19 G.K. Chesterton once wrote, “Hell is God’s great compliment to the reality of human freedom and the dignity of human choice.” People who may end up in hell don’t go to hell because they haven’t heard of Jesus. People end up in hell because they spend a lifetime telling God, whatever they may know of God, that they can live without him just fine, thank you. And in the end, God sadly gives people what they have always wanted, a life forever without him.
But some in our world, when it comes to the truth, have received far less. And so could it be that God, who alone knows the human heart, who alone is able to rightly judge a human life, might look at a person who never even had access to the truth and, in his grace and wisdom, judge that person accordingly? Could it be that those who are given less, from them much less will be expected?

Now understand this. If that man in Afghanistan does find his way to heaven it will not be because of the Muslim faith. He will not be there because of Muhammad or because of the Koran or because he was a good person. If a man like that is in heaven someday it will be, I believe, for the very same reason that you and I find ourselves in heaven someday...by the grace of God through Jesus Christ alone. If there are many paths up the mountain, in the end each path goes by way of Jesus.

Again, nobody gets to God expect through Jesus because there is no other way to deal with the problem of human sin.

But if a Buddhist, or a Hindu, or a Muslim ends up in the kingdom of heaven, who am I to object. As I’ve said here before, I expect we’re all going to find a great many surprises in God’s kingdom. Some people will be surprised, I’m sure, to see me there! But by the grace of Christ, I hope to be there and surprise a few people.

This mystery of salvation is not supposed to make us arrogant or condescending. It ought to make us very humble and grateful people. We don’t know who is going to be saved or not saved. That’s never our call to make. That’s God’s call.

We only know from the scriptures that all people are made in the image of God, and that, therefore, all people are extraordinarily valuable to God. We know that God loves every person on this planet as much as every other person on this planet. We know that Christ died to save us all. We know it is God’s desires that all people to be saved.\(^{20}\) In this respect, Christianity is incredibly inclusive! Every person you meet this week is a person from whom Jesus Christ died. And if the Gospel isn’t good news for everybody, it isn’t good news for anybody.\(^{21}\)

This is exactly why Christ calls his followers, over and over again, never to approach the world around us from a position of superiority. Yes, we can be confident that salvation comes through Jesus Christ. But we never know who, in the end, will be saved. And if we are saved, it is not because of any good in us. It is, simply, by the grace and goodness of God.

And that is why we, full of gratitude, and joy, and humility, are called to go out into the world and serve the people Jesus served, and love the people Jesus loves, and invite the people Jesus invites. Which is, by the way, everybody you meet.

The rest, in the end, is in God’s gracious hands.

Amen.

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The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

~ Oprah and Madonna aren’t the only ones who believe that there are many paths to God. Millions of people believe this. Why? What do you think makes this idea of many paths up the mountain so attractive to so many people these days?

~ Getting right to the heart of the matter, do you believe that Jesus Christ is the only way to God? How do you back up your perspective?

~ Jeff made the claim that all religions do not, in fact, teach the same thing. Rather, the major religions are, at their core, radically different. Do you agree? Why or why not?

\(^{20}\) II Peter 3:9 says, “God is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” (New International Version)

\(^{21}\) This is something I’ve heard pastor and author John Ortberg say quite often. I wholeheartedly agree.
~ Have you ever personally considered any other major world religion besides Christianity? If so, what did you find attractive about it? What aspects of Christianity attract you and which ones repel you?

~ In considering popular objections that there can’t be just one way to God, writer R.C. Sproul makes this point: “In light of mankind’s universal rebellion against God, the issue is not why is there only one way, but why is there any way at all?” What do you think about this? Should we be grateful that we have been given even one path to God?

~ Is it possible for Christians to believe that there is no salvation outside of Jesus Christ and yet present that belief without coming across arrogant or patronizing? If so, how?

~ The Bible says about God in Jeremiah 29:13, “You will seek and find me when you seek me with all your heart.” What are some practical suggestions you could give a friend who wanted to know how he or she could seek God that way? Have you taken those steps yourself? If so, what have been the results so far?

**Further Scripture Readings for the Week:**
- **Monday:** I John 4:1-12 (Re-read what John says about testing the spirits to seek truth.)
- **Tuesday:** I Kings 18:16-46 (The vivid story of Elijah and the prophets of Baal)
- **Wednesday:** Acts 4:1-22 (Peter’s profession that Jesus is the only hope for salvation)
- **Thursday:** John 14:1-14 (Jesus’ famous statement about being the way, truth and life)
- **Friday:** Matthew 7:7-12 (Note Jesus’ promise about those who honestly seek the truth)
- **Saturday:** Romans 1:18-25 (What excuse do any of us really have in the end?)