

- I. Intro: Aren't all religions essentially the same?
- A. Aren't they all based on the same ideas and ideals – the belief that some higher power calls us to love and serve others? Be kind and honest? Isn't it enough to be “spiritually alive” in whatever way feels right to you? Isn't it safe to assume – what with so many religions out there – that no one of them can contain the fullness of the spiritual realm, therefore we should view them all as equally valid?
- B. Why can't we just agree with: 1) Gandhi that different religions are simply different roads up the same mountain – but that they all meet at the top? Or 2) agree with John Godfrey Saxe, whose poem Six Blind Men and the Elephant describes six blind men touching a different part of the same elephant and then making incomplete observations about the same elephant, why can't we agree with him that different faiths are describing different aspects of the same thing.¹
- C. People might call God by different names but are praying to the same entity and it is arrogant to claim otherwise.² Why can't we just agree that all religions are essentially the same? How can we claim that good people – smart people – who sincerely believe differently than we do are wrong.
- II. Today – as we continue in the I Am series - we take up this question. It grows out of a particularly disruptive statement made by Jesus. It's found in John 14.
- A. In John 12, Jesus parades into Jerusalem for the Passover. In John 13 the disciples gather in the Upper Room for the Passover meal, Jesus washes their feet and predicts that Peter will deny him three times. We then arrive at John 14, which opens with Jesus saying:
1. **“Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. ² My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. ⁴ You know the way to the place where I am going.”**
 2. **⁵ Thomas said to him, “Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?”**
 3. **⁶ Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.** There's the money line.
- B. John 14:6 is the marquee headline. I suspect you have heard it – often. For our purposes today let's note that it is another of the I Am statements Jesus makes.
- C. I am the Bread of Life; I am the Light of the World; I am the gate; I am the Good Shepherd; I am the resurrection and the life; and here: I am “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.
- D. These “I am” statements are big and bold and shocking claims made by Jesus. He lives simply and humbly, but there is nothing modest about his claims. In so many ways, he announces that He is God, savior, Lord, King, the hinge point of history and more. He repeatedly forces us to opt in or opt out – but only on his terms. He is not interested in being only our guide or coach. He demands to be Lord.
- E. In this particular passage he makes a uniquely outlandish and unpopular claim.

- III. There are a couple things worth noting about John 14 before we drill down on verse 6.
- A. It's worth realizing the grid the disciples would have heard this statement in light of – to understand their context. Jesus made this statement at the Passover meal, during which they were rehashing one of biggest moments in Jewish history: the Exodus
1. The Exodus is the event – told in... the Book of Exodus - when God rescued his chosen people. He supernaturally secured their release from slavery via Moses and ten plagues; he then parted the Red Sea to give them a way of escape.
 2. In so many ways, the Exodus was their glory moment. This was the story they repeated most often. And it was all about God making “a way out.”³ Against that backdrop, Jesus is claiming to be “the way out.”
- B. It is also worth noting how Christ's claim to be truth – I am the way, the truth and the life - remains so important all these years later.
1. We are presently in the throes of epistemological confusion – that is, we not only can't agree on what is true, we cannot agree on how to agree on what is true. There is so much confusion here, that some now no longer believe in any thing called truth, there is simply my truth and your truth.
 2. Just to be clear, there have been changes in the past. 1) If you go back a few hundred years, truth was often established by tradition; 2) When we hit the Enlightenment – and then the Scientific Revolution – we starting basing truth on reason and data; 3) As Christ followers we have always appreciated tradition and reason and data, but have been grounded first to revelation – to the Bible.
 3. Since the 60s there has been a growing number of people who base truth on their experience or sense of things. In recent days we have the dual challenge that:
 - a) What people believe to be true keeps changing;
 - b) And many are cancelling those whose views are not “up to the moment.”
 4. This is causing a lot of trouble, but it is not the focus of this sermon. I simply want to note, Christ's claim to be – not just true, but truth – is powerful and loaded.
- C. I want to make four points about this exclusive claim.
- IV. One: Jesus made it. He does make exclusive claims.
- A. There's been many people in history who've said, “Let's just love each other” and left it at that. Jesus is not in this group. He claims to have a corner on truth and to be the only way.
- B. Indeed, such claims were not a small part of his teaching: 1) He not only claims to be God and Savior. He claims to be the only way to forgiveness and eternal life; 2) He doesn't say, “I point to the truth.” He says, “I am the truth.” 3) He doesn't say, I am a way, he says, I am the only way; 4) He doesn't say, You can embrace my teaching but reject me, or you can accept some of my claims about myself and follow me without signing off on everything. No, he says, I am God. I define the way this works. It's all or nothing.

- C. I want to be clear, this passage should be controversial. There is no honest way to lessen its punch. I am not suggesting it's only controversial if you misunderstand it. I am claiming it is controversial at its core.
1. If someone today were to make the claims Jesus made, we would consider that person dangerous or disturbed.
 2. If someone today – from another religion – were to make the kind of exclusive claims Jesus made, we would take offense.
 3. I am saying, before we wrestle with the implications of what Jesus said – before we try to unpack this - you need to realize, the claim is as harsh as you think. As harsh as you fear. Perhaps harsher.
- D. And while we are here let me note, it's not an isolated passage.
1. The Old Testament repeatedly warns against idolatry – that is, worshipping anyone or anything other than the one true God.⁴ It is also quite clear that other gods are idols are fake, they do not exist.
 2. When we turn to the New Testament, we not only have Christ's comments in John 14, but many others:
 - a) In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus argues that there is a popular trail that leads away from God and a narrow "road less traveled" that leads towards him.⁵
 - b) What we find the apostles' saying is that, "there is no other name under heaven through which men can be saved."⁶
 3. We are always free to say that The Bible is wrong - that Jesus has it wrong; that there is more than one way up the mountain; that there is one god with many names and expressions. But we should not pretend that the Bible leaves this option open.
- V. Point number two: This claim is unpopular. It is now. It was then.
- A. In the first century, Jews were called atheists because they didn't believe in all the other gods, and Christians – who were also called atheists for the same reasons - got in trouble not for claiming that Jesus was God, but for claiming that he was the only way. This was considered mean, small minded and intolerant.
- B. The fact that this claim is unpopular shouldn't surprise us - we are saying to people, if you do not believe this you are wrong and you are making a horrible mistake.
- VI. Number Three: All religions make exclusive claims.
- A. All religious beliefs are exclusive. They do not claim to be one path among many, or even simply the best path, but that they are the only true path.
1. Islam does not claim that Christianity is a viable option.
 2. Buddhism does not suggest that Hinduism also works.
 3. Atheism isn't open to God being active for some people in some corners of the galaxy.
- B. What almost all religions claim is that, while there are aspects of truth in other worldviews – even some things worth celebrating – they are not ultimately true.⁷

1. Now, as an aside, the Baha'i presents itself as an exception. They say that all roads lead down the same path,⁸ which sounds inclusive, but it is actually an equally exclusive claim. I have spent time at their Temple talking to their staff and I assure you, while the conversations are interesting and civil, they are very clear, I am wrong – that is Christianity is wrong - and they - that is, the Baha'i – are right.

2. While I am here let me note that some branches of Hinduism make similar sounding claims, arguing that God approaches men in whatever manner they approach him.⁹ And there are also people within every major religion (including those who claim to be Christ-followers) who – against their own creeds – say that all religions work. Some who say they follow Christ reduce his message to one of good works. Say he is just a great example – which isn't what he claimed.

3. Here is the point, we are all exclusive in our beliefs about religion. We are just exclusive in different ways and about different things, and those who claim that all religions are the same

C. I would submit to you that none of the major religions leave that option open. The idea that all paths are valid is really wishful thinking¹⁰ by people who are doing a lot of wishing and not much thinking.

D. When someone says to you, “they are all the same,” usually what that means is that they do not know much about the topic.

1. If you say, I hear the Cubs signed Andy Dalton, hopefully he'll be a really good point guard. And I say, “Uh, the Cubs are a baseball, Point guards are basketball, and Dalton is a quarterback – which is football.”

2. And they say, “Same thing. A professional athlete in Chicago. There's no difference.”

3. What I know is that you don't know what you're talking about. You've reduced things so much that you're ignoring critical distinctions. It's like saying:

a) You dropped a child off at the nursery, we'll be sure you get a child back. It may not be the one you dropped off, but hey, a child is a child. Now some of you may actually want a different child – that's a different issue. The point is, some distinctions matter!

VII. Point # 4: The differences between the major worldviews are material. As it turns out, religions are superficially the same but deeply different.

A. The differences b/w the creeds of the major religions are substantial.¹¹

B. This is not to say that there is not any overlap, there is.

1. Confucius says, “Don't do to others what you do not want them to do to you.” Jesus says: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. These are different, but there is overlap.

2. Most of the major religions celebrate love, affirm caring for your family, and tell us not to lie or steal. We could come up with other examples.

C. But we need to be honest. At the deepest level there are irreconcilable differences. Which means: while they might all be wrong, they cannot all be right.

1. Buddhists generally deny that there is a god. Jews, Christians and Muslims say there is one – but only one – God. Some forms of Hinduism say there are 300,000 gods. They can't all be right.

2. Buddhists and Hindus both believe that the way forward is by losing yourself – losing your individuality by melding into a single cosmic consciousness. And that this happens through a cycle of reincarnations, during which we work off our bad karma.¹² Christianity says we live once, die, face judgment and head to an eternity in which we always remain uniquely who we are. And, that we do not work off our bad karma, that Christ died for our sin. Both views cannot be right.

3. The New Testament claims that Jesus is a prophet, that he is God and that he rose from the dead. The Koran says that Jesus is a prophet but not God – in fact, to claim that he is God is blasphemy and the idea that he rose from the dead is a myth. Both cannot be right.¹³

D. In a humorous article, Steve Turner wrote, “We believe that all religions are basically the same - at least the one that we read was. They all believe in love and goodness. They only differ on matters of creation, sin, heaven, hell, God, and salvation.”

E. Look, I understand the desire to find a way to say these are all the same

1. Because then everyone can stop fighting and get along – sing “live and let live” and be at peace.

2. Beliefs about ultimate matters often foster deeply and passionately held positions that have spilled over in ugly ways

3. The goal behind the “all roads lead up the mountain” and “we are just touching different parts of the same elephant” movement is well intentioned. The goal is peace.

4. But the price is truth.¹⁴

5. Different world views:

a) Do not share the same starting assumptions

b) Do not have the same goals

c) Do not agree on the nature of God or the way man's problems can be fixed.

d) Saying they are all the same does not make any more sense than saying, “Andy Dalton is the new point guard for the Cubs.”

VIII. Point # 5: Christianity is substantially different from all of the rest.

A. In fact, in a couple of major ways the Christian faith differs from the rest of the pack more substantially than the rest of the pack differs from each other.¹⁵

1. First, on their understanding of how we are reconciled with God.

a) Other faiths assume that we have the ability to move forward on our own – to earn God's favor, become enlightened, pay off our debt, however the goal is stated they claim, “we can do this!” We can improve our position. And they provide us with a detailed list about what we must be about.

- b) Christianity says that sin has ruined us so completely that we cannot save ourselves. Forget keeping God's law, we cannot keep our own standards. And so we accrue a debt that we cannot pay.
- c) Christianity says we cannot improve our ultimate status, we must be rescued by another – namely, Jesus, who is God himself.
- d) Yes, there are things we are expected to do – e.g., spiritual disciplines like prayer or sacraments (like baptism); and there are also ethical principles to follow. But we do not claim that these help us earn our salvation.
- e) Other faiths claim an equation that looks something like this: Faith & Good Works = Salvation
 - (1) Christianity claims the equation works this way: Faith = Salvation + Good Works.
 - (2) In short, we must be rescued by the actions of another. Every other faith or religious system suggests that we must reach up. The Christian faith claims that God reaches down. Salvation is a gift.
 - (3) As Paul writes in his letter to the Galatians, “We are saved by grace through faith, not of ourselves, it is a gift of God, not as a result of our works.”

2. All of this leads to the 2nd major distinctive: the person of Christ.

- a) No other major religious figure has claimed to be fully God & fully man
- b) No other major religious figure has claimed to be the Creator
- c) No other founder has claimed to be God incarnate
- d) To be able to personally pay your moral debt
- e) To be able to defeat death
- f) Or offer to live inside of you.¹⁶
- g) Jesus is unique. There is a small subset of people who founded major religions or championed significant and helpful moral reforms. There is a second subset of people who claim to be God. Almost all of the people in this second set are in mental hospitals. Which is understandable – after all, the measure of our mental health has to be the distance between who we think we are and who we are.

IX. Well, let me wrap this up by reminding you that sincerity is not a test for truth.¹⁷

A. Some believe that if someone believes something passionately enough it should be affirmed – not just tolerated, but affirmed. To do otherwise is disrespectful.

B. I would submit to you that sincerity – while commendable – is not a Litmus test for truth. You can sincerely believe that $1 + 1 = 5$. Your sincerity does not change the fact that you are wrong.

C. I do not know why – in the matters of ultimate importance – people are willing to suspend common sense by arguing that all religions are true or that whatever someone believes is true is true for them, I want to ask:

1. Would you go to a banker who sincerely believes that $1 + 1 = 18$? Would you trust a surgeon who sincerely believes they can fix your knee by removing your tonsils?
2. All people have value, not all ideas do. Every person is precious, not every belief. Some ideas, some beliefs are wrong.
3. Sincerity is not the ultimate test of truth

D. If a young couple pulls up alongside you – and you look in the car and realize that she is in labor and he is panicked and he asks, “Which way to the hospital?” It’s not helpful to say, “All roads will get you there. Just drive!” If there really is only one way to the hospital, then those who suggest that any road will get you there are not being open-minded and helpful. They are being dangerous. They are hurting others.¹⁸

X. Let me also note that instead of being frustrated that there is only one path. We should celebrate that there is a path at all.

A. While I understand that you would like all roads to lead to heaven. Don’t let that side track you from the amazing news: there is a way forward.

B. There is a way to have your sins forgiven. There is a way to get a clean start. There is a way to be reconciled to God. There is away to gain eternal life.

C. For God so loved the world that He gave his only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have ever lasting life.

D. Let me suggest that rather than being sideways over God’s plan, that you marvel at the fact that God sent His Son to suffer and die for you so that there is a way back .

E. And rather than focus on its exclusivity, let’s marvel at its inclusivity: it is open to anyone, even a broken, sinful person like you and me.

F. Yes, there is an edge here. And yes, some of this is confusing. But there is great news here – there is a way. Jesus is the way, the truth and the life.

¹ This story is supposed to represent how various religions only understand part of God, while no one can truly see the whole picture. To claim full knowledge of God is arrogant.

² According to a recent Barna poll, 40% of American believe that when Christian, Jews, Buddhists, Muslims, etc pray to their god, all of those individuals are actually praying to the same god, but simply using different names for that deity.

³ In his response, Jesus makes an important shift. Rather than speaking of his way to the Father (the cross), Jesus announces the disciples’ way to the Father. “Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me’” (John 14:6). D.A. Carson articulates the power and gravity of Jesus’ simple statement, “I am the way.”

⁴ The Bible contends that we are worshippers – which is pretty easy to prove. We worship sports, power, money, celebrities, etc.. We realign our life around a variety of things we find inspiring. Against this

practice the Bible says we should limit our worship to God and calls the worship of other things – whatever they may be – idolatry. Some would argue that this is the most frequent topic in the Old Testament.

⁵ He further suggests that many people will be led astray by false prophets – that is, that those who claim to speak for God - but do not. These people will argue for a different approach, will develop a different set of starting assumptions or try to lead people down a very different path. Jesus says we must guard ourselves against them.

⁶ Acts 4:12

⁷ There are certain truths that are advanced in healthy cultures / worldviews – e.g., kids need to be cared for, it's best to honor your parents, debt is a bad idea – but perhaps fewer than you think. For starters, cultures often decay, “progressing” beyond their traditional values. And, some of what you assume is advanced by other religions (love your enemies, care for the poor) is not universally embraced. Muslims are instructed to kill the infidels and Hindus believe that helping the poor is wrongheaded because that is their karma. (Much of the aid provided to the poor in India is provided by Christian groups).

⁸ The Baha'i web site says: “In reality there is only one religion, the religion of God. This one religion is continually evolving, and each particular religious system represents a stage in the evolution of the whole.”

⁹ “In whatever way men approach Me, even so do I approach them.” Quoted from the Hindu Scripture by Swami Chidananda of Divine Life Society. Kipling uttered essentially the same idea when he wrote, “Many roads thou hasn't fashioned; all of them lead to the light.”

¹⁰ It's not actually wishful *thinking*, in that it is not thinking at all. It is just wishing.

¹¹ I stress this point in part because, beginning in the 19th century – when Comparative Religion became an academic discipline – much time and energy have been spent trying to show that the major worldviews were (are) essentially the same. That is, the “essence” of every religion is the same as the “essence” of every other religion. If you read any comparative religion you will almost certain see people advocating for: 1) the universal fatherhood of God & brotherhood of man; 2) the “all roads lead up the same mountain” analogy.

¹² The idea that “ultimate reality is a oneness beyond differentiation” is called Monism. Buddhism – which has different branches, some are polytheistic, some are pantheistic but most are atheistic - is impersonal and Monistic. Hinduism is polytheistic and Monistic.

¹³ In an essay entitled, “Is One Religion As Good As Another?” J.I. Packer writes, “The more one thinks about the question, the odder it seems. ‘God for what?’ The great religions do not even claim to be good for the same thing.” J.I. Packer, *Isn't One Religion As Good As Another?*, *Hard Questions*, edited by Frank Colquhoun, IVP, 1976, p. 15.

¹⁴ And we've seen this before. In their desperate effort to avoid conflict the false prophets of Israel cried, ‘peace, peace.’ But there was no peace.”

¹⁵ J.I. Packer, p. 16.

¹⁶ Michael Green writes, “Perhaps the greatest difference of all (among religious views) lies in the Christian assertion that none of us can save ourselves or make ourselves acceptable to God, try as we may: all other faiths assert that by keeping their teachings a person will be saved, fulfilled or reborn.”

¹⁷ Not developed in this article / talk is the suggestion that Christianity developed in an isolated, provincial area where it was possible to get everyone to believe in one path, but in today’s multi-cultural, multi-faith, global village, they would have changed their claims and affirmed the idea of other faiths. In point of fact, Roman and Greek culture was very pluralistic, and it was in these very settings that Christians argued for one God. See Paul’s speech in Athens (Acts 17:16-24). (See also, John Ortberg’s sermon, “Is Jesus the Only Way?”)

¹⁸ But, that is not the way most people see it today. And so, we need to be prepared to be ridiculed for our position. In the recent past the idea of truth has been lost and tolerance has been redefined from “peacefully co-existing alongside people you disagree with” to “affirming the beliefs of others.” We are expected to affirm almost any sincerely held view – so, the idea that Jesus is the way and the truth and the life and that no one gets to the Father except through him is not going to play well. We will increasingly be viewed as small minded and mean. This is not, by the way, a new problem. The Jews faced it. People got quite mad at them for not being willing to share their God with others when the others were willing to share their gods with the Jews. It’s much easier to be liked if you are willing to affirm everyone.