**Week 4 | February 3 | Is Christianity Too Narrow?**

**Scripture: John 14:1-7, Acts 4:8-12, Luke 15:11-32**

**Message Big Idea:** God provided a way for everyone to find their way back to him. Most religions boil down to humanity trying to reach God, but Christianity is about God reaching humanity.

**Introduction: The Complexity of Choice**

Have you ever felt like life was filled with too much?

* Too much to do.
* Too much to take care of.
* Too much to remember.
* Too much to know.

The infinite variety in our lives can be overwhelming, right? Most of us are probably aware of the vast number of choices that we all have to make on a daily basis about a plethora of different situations and conditions.

Here is what I mean. Make this less sexist… talk to the spouse who doesn’t regularly do the shopping. I want to talk more specifically to the guys in the room for just a minute. How many of you have been sent to a grocery store for a few items before?

Not long ago, I got a much better understanding of the scope of “too much choice” when I went to the grocery store for a few “simple” items.

Side note:

* Did you know that in 1990, not even 30 years ago, the average grocery store had around 7,000-9,000 items that were consistently being sold?
* Today, the average grocery store has over 43,000 items to choose from.

I wasn’t aware of those stats until that day.

Make examples more concise…

* The first item on my list was lettuce. Easy, right? I know enough about grocery stores to know that I have to go to the produce section, but look at what I found when I got there. **(On Screen: Lettuce pic)** Why exactly are there so many choices for lettuce? I mean, it’s lettuce! 
* I then went over to the cereal aisle. Do you have any idea how many different kinds of Cheerios there are? Eighteen! One would be justified to ask what possible use there would be for eighteen different options of Cheerios! But my personal favorite had to be the **(On Screen: Cheerios)** Honey Nut Cheerios Medley Crunch! It’s like they took the other seventeen kinds and tossed them in one box and shook it all up! 
* And then I wrapped up this experience with a trip down the toothpaste aisle. **(On Screen: Toothpaste pic)** That was frightening! Do we really know how much gingivitis our particular brand of toothpaste is fighting as compared to the others? No, we don't know what half of that stuff means that they put on the box! 

Whether it’s at the grocery store or it’s somewhere else, the enormous number of choices that we all have can be a little overwhelming, can’t it? Now this is all very different from years past, because today, we have full access to everything. You name it and we can get our hands on it. And that isn’t just limited to Cheerios or toothpaste; this also applies to real life issues. Everyone has easy access to a smorgasbord of ideas, worldviews and religious beliefs.

And just like with a trip to the grocery store, religion offers a wide variety of choices, beliefs and morals. And all a person has to do is Google a certain religion or belief and within .0001 seconds they can learn all they’d ever want to know about that religion.

**Series Recap:**

Over the past several weeks, we have been joining with hundreds of churches in the Chicago area in a 7-week series called “Explore God”. During this series we are digging into 7 big questions that most people have about God, faith and purpose.

And our desire is not to convince anyone of anything, but to invite everyone to explore these questions together. And today’s question, in our modern world full of choices: **Is Christianity too narrow?**

**Coexist:**

Now, I don't actually think that having lots of choice when it comes to the grocery store, or clothing lines or restaurants is a bad thing. All those choices can be helpful and a really good thing. But we are talking about food, clothes and entertainment. “what do we do when we have that same amount of choice when it comes to religion?” But should we have that same philosophy of, the more choice the better, when it comes to religion and our eternal destination?

When it comes to religion, our society has increasingly responded to this complicated landscape by calling for more tolerance. Many of you have probably seen this **(On Screen: Coexist Sticker)** bumper sticker before, right? The Coexist model says, “let’s just all get along. You pick your own way and just be nice and kind to other people. And whatever works for you…works!” And to most reasonable people, that sounds pretty good, doesn't it?

Jesus calls us to something far more than “coexist” or tolerance.

As Christ-followers or just as human beings in general, we should do our very best to not be divisive, to not oppress, and not be hurtful to other people. Can we agree that all of that is a good goal? There is no doubt that our worlds would all be better if we could get this idea right. And so the intent of the “coexist” message is good and it feels right.

The legendary songwriters, John Lennon and Yoko Ono wrote about this concept all the way back in 1971 when John recorded these words,

Cut first and last verse.

*Imagine there's no heaven  
It's easy if you try  
No hell below us  
Above us only sky  
Imagine all the people living for today*

*Imagine there's no countries  
It isn't hard to do  
Nothing to kill or die for  
And no religion too*

*Imagine no possessions  
I wonder if you can  
No need for greed or hunger  
A brotherhood of man  
Imagine all the people sharing all the world*

*Imagine all the people living life in peace*

*You may say I'm a dreamer  
But I'm not the only one  
I hope some day you'll join us  
And the world will be as one*

A world at peace:

* No border division
* No separation by religion or nationality
* All of humanity being unattached to material possessions.

Bring the intro back in… choices at grocery store. Be careful about not to just be about “eternal life” a stereotype of Christians. That all seems right and good, but what about when we are talking of even more serious issues like when eternal life is at stake?

**Religious Paths to Eternal Life:**

I know that there are some in here today who fully support the coexist movement or those who believe in a different religion. And I do want to acknowledge that there are some really wonderful things that I think we *all* can learn from other beliefs and religions. There are many practices that it would behoove everyone to adapt for their own spiritual journey. And so we want to be careful to never write anyone off just because we don't think, act or practice in the same ways. Can we all agree to that? *(ask for affirming response)*

However, with each religion there is a path to eternal life and how one finds eternal life is of utmost importance and it does differ from religion to religion.

I came across some research recently that was done by the Pew Research Center and they found: Are these the effective stats? What about the ones about how many people think there a many ways to God? Change the stats.

* Nearly 40% of Americans believe that eternal life is a result of our actions. So they believe what we do and how much we achieve will determine where we go when we die.
* Another 30% said that they didn't believe in eternal life at all, or that they felt there were other ways to eternal life outside of ones beliefs and actions.
* While the final 30% says that what a person believes is the key factor in achieving eternal life.

Need to define what “eternal life” means.

That was research exclusively polled Americans. We can broaden that lens to look at some of the largest religions and what each believes about how a person finds eternal life.

* **Orthodox Judaism** says that a person has to obey 613 different commands in order to please God.
* **Islam** has the 5 pillars and this is all about how one hopes to work their way to heaven
* **Buddhism** is all about the ultimate goal of achieving nirvana. And one gets there by working toward a distinction of desire.
* **Hinduism** says that one works their way to heaven by becoming one with Brahma, the all-prevailing force of the universe; and that is achieved by living a moral life. A person lives life over and over again until you get it right.

And from these different religions I see that there are two major observations that we can make based on this information.

* **Observation #1:** Each of these religions provides their own unique path. That necessarily excludes the others…That means that every religion is “narrow”. There are guidelines, restrictions and specific direction for every religion that are different from each other.
* **Observation #2:** BUT, each of these religions has this major similarity in common – it’s all up to you and your own effort.

**The Uniqueness of Christianity**

Talk about how there are so many different perspectives on what Christianity means… Today I want to talk about what it truly means to follow Jesus…to be a Christ-follower (figure out where this goes).

They have one thing in common: **DOING**. Measuring up. Meeting requirements. **Do enough=you’re in.**

It’s sort of like buying airline tickets...If you are willing to pay more, you can have a better experience. I have never flown first class but I am told its amazing! ☺ You get the best service, you don’t have to wait in lines and sometimes you can even get access to the nice airport lounges that actually get cleaned occasionally! Imagine that! But the only way to get the perks is to pay more than everyone else.

The same is true of this DOING approach to life and faith…

At the end of the day, it’s about how hard you work, how much you do, and you’ll get a good seat in eternity. Kept the commands, obey, and do good and hopefully you are good enough to get in.

It puts everything on ME. I do, I get. I work. I am accepted.

BUT Jesus comes a long and says: Know me, you know God. And, ***I am coming for you***.

This should be the transition statement.

They all say DO. True Christianity says DONE.

Explanation of what Jesus did for us here.

Sometimes people say, ‘Well, I don’t think I could be a Christian because I’m kind of not good enough. And if I was going to be a Christian, there are lots of things in my life I’d just kind of need to sort out first. I need to change things,’ and so on. No, no, no. You come exactly as you are. It’s not about what you do or what you can achieve; it’s about what has been done for you by Jesus on the cross. You receive total forgiveness. And you receive it as a gift.

Religion says: Eternity is reserved for those who work hard enough, do enough good things, and obey enough, and only those who do that can reach God.

Christianity is like front row, first class ticket and you didn’t pay for it, because Jesus has already paid for our membership. Rich or poor, black or white, regardless of where you live or how much money you have – he wants to include you.

It is the most radically inclusive invitation ever given.

The doors are wide open. Entry is not based on your qualifications.  Entry is based only on you accepting Christ's invitation. ~~Which faith system is exclusive & narrow?~~

Jesus’ ministry was all about God trying to reach us.

This is what the writers of the NT believed, and the 1st century followers believed. Paul….

Romans 6:23 says; “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our lord.”

*The free gift*. I don’t know what you feel when you hear that expression, ‘free gift’. I know for me, I think, ‘Uh-uh, no, I don’t believe that! There’s bound to be a catch.’ We’re deeply suspicious of anyone who offers us a free gift.

When you get an email from an African prince offering you all their money…You know something is not right?!

And we’re so suspicious. And we think, you know, ‘God is offering this free gift. There must be a catch.’ There isn’t a catch. It *is* free. But it’s not cheap.

Talk about the good part of repentance… Acts 3:19.

It cost Jesus his life. He died for you, he died for me, so that we could be forgiven and receive this gift of eternal life, this gift of a relationship with him. And we receive it through repentance and faith. ‘Repentance’ sounds a really heavy word, but all it means is turning away from the bad stuff in our life, changing our mind about that stuff and saying: ‘Actually, that doesn’t do us any good anyway.’ God loves us. He never asks us to give up things that are good for us. He just says, ‘Get rid of that junk. Turn away from it.’

Use “Christ-follower” And sometimes people talk about ‘the cost of being a Christian’, the cost of being a Christian is nothing compared to the cost of not being a Christian. The cost of being a Christian is nothing compared to what it cost Jesus to make it possible for us to have this relationship with God. That’s repentance.

And then faith. Faith is just trust. That’s what it means. Everyone exercises faith. You’re exercising faith by sitting on these chairs – you’re trusting that the chair will hold you up. All the way through life we exercise faith.

Even an atheist ~~If you are an atheist~~, you are exercising faith in the fact that you believe there is no God. That was an act of faith: you can’t prove it, but you are basing your life on it as an act of faith.

But now you can base your life on faith in what Jesus did on the cross for you… Now you can put your trust in *him*.

(TP Draws Picture of two ledges – “God” on one side and “US” on the other)

1. All other religions are expressions of our attempt to get to God (Draw arrows from US to God falling short of spanning the gap between them)
2. BUT Christianity is unique in that it’s the only religion in which God says, “I’ll come to you.” (Draw an arrow from God to US that does span the gap)

Eternal life starts right now.

**Story: Versions of the Prodigal Son**

This could be more concise…don’t need this much about these two stories. In Luke 15 Jesus tells three stories to illustrate how God comes looking for us. The first is a story of a shepherd who loses a sheep…And what does the shepherd do? Does he say, “I hope the sheep will make the right choices and finds its way back to me!” NO!!! The good shepherd went to the sheep…He went out looking for the sheep so he could bring it back…With his power, with His know-how, out of His goodness…Not the Sheep’s.

Then He tells a story of a widow who loses a coin…and just like the shepherd went looking for the lost sheep, the woman goes searching for the lost coin which, of course, had no chance of finding its way back to her...It’s just a coin!

Should Buddhist version come first?

Put a Scripture on screen. And then this sequence of stories climaxes with the story of a Son who turns his back on his family, runs away and ends up hitting absolute bottom. And out of desperation the son decides to return to his fathers house to beg for mercy...just to be welcomed back as a hired servant…nothing more. BUT what he doesn't know is that his father has been waiting and watching for him every day. And as soon as he sees his son on the horizon, the father takes off running, yelling “welcome home!, welcome home!”...gave him a big bear hug...kissed him…  And when the son offered to work his way back into the family, the father says, “that’s ridiculous, you are my son, we’re throwing a party.”

This is an incredible picture of God’s love for us. He runs to the Son, He’s the one doing the work, willing to earn. So many of us feel stuck in a religion that says “Do these things and you MIGHT get to God.” Jesus says I have done it all. Stop trying, just trust me.

Many of you may be familiar with this incredible story but you may not know that there is actually a Buddhist version of this story…

In the Buddhist version of this story, the son stumbles into his Father’s house and only after begging is he welcomed back…but just as the lowest of his employees.  His job? Well, he is a Full-time shoveler of feces.  Which he does for 20 LONG years…Just for the opportunity to get back into the Father’s good graces at the end of his life.

I think these two stories perfectly illustrate the DO vs. DONE difference between other religions and Christianity.

**Conclusion**

God came for us and DID everything required for everyone to find their way back to him through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus…Which we are going to talk about more next week.

Jesus says “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” – John 14:6

Need to add next part about now we can know God.

That’s not bad news, That’s good news, incredible news, because it means meets us right where we are and gives us the strength to change and be like him.

Is Christianity too narrow for the world today? Not at all. It’s exactly what the world needs.

Maybe “It is narrow…all religions are…but it is also radically inclusive.”

while it is narrow, it is not exclusive. You don’t have to “measure up.” You don’t have to “meet requirements.” You don’t have to “do enough” to get in.

The message of Christianity is radically inclusive in that Jesus invites all people to find their way back to God by accepting what he has already done.

It is a God who will search for you, run to you, and come and find you when you’ve lost your way.

What Jesus said is Incredible. Bold. World-Changing!

*~~(Not sure if we should include this here)~~* ~~But it’s only true if Jesus is who he says he is...So make sure you come back next week as we continue to explore God together with the question: “Is Jesus really God?”~~

**Communion Idea**

There is perhaps no better reminder of the great work that God has already DONE for us in order to bridge the gap between US and HIM then communion.

In communion we receive a physical reminder, the bread and the cup, of the free gift of grace and new life offered to anyone and everyone through Jesus.

It is a celebratory meal like the one in the story of the prodigal Son and all of us prodigal Sons and daughters are invited to the table of Jesus.

The price has already been paid in full…all you need to do is turn back towards the God who has been searching for you and receive His gift.