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

**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.

**Scripture:** John 14:6, Acts 4:8-12, Luke 15:11-32

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**Introduction: The Complexity of Choice**

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

* Too much to do.
* Too much to remember.
* Too much to know.

The amount of activity and information swirling around us can leave our heads spinning. Every day we are bombarded with a vast number of choices to make a plethora of different decisions.

Here is an example of what I mean. Let me ask you… Raise your hand if you are responsible for purchasing groceries for your household. *(hands)* OK, hands down. Now, raise your hand if you are not the primary person responsible for grocery shopping, but you’ve been sent to the store before to pick up a few items. *(hands)* I fall into this category, and I have to say there are definitely too many choices at the grocery store!

For example, I was asked to pick up “lettuce.” Sounds easy enough, right? Until you come face to face with this! *(Lettuce)* Why are there so many choices for lettuce? I mean, it’s lettuce!

Then I went over to the cereal aisle. *(Cereal)* Do you have any idea how many different kinds of Cheerios there are? Eighteen! What possible need do we have for eighteen different options of Cheerios? Of course, my personal favorite is the *(Box)*Honey Nut Cheerios Medley Crunch! It’s like they just took the other seventeen kinds and tossed them in one box.

And don’t even get me started on my trip down the *(Toothpaste)* toothpaste aisle! I didn’t know whether it is more important to fight plaque or gingivitis or to whiten my teeth! I went with the white teeth.

Did you know that…

* In 1990, not even 30 years ago, the average grocery store had around 7,000-9,000 items?
* Today, the average grocery store has over 43,000 items to choose from!

Too many choices!

Whether it’s at the grocery store or somewhere else, the enormous number of choices we all have can be a little overwhelming. Everything is at our fingertips! And this isn’t just limited to Cheerios or toothpaste; it also applies to ideologies and perspectives. Everyone has easy access to a smorgasbord of worldviews and religious beliefs.

All a person has to do is Google a certain religion and within a nanosecond he or she can learn all they’d ever wanted to know about that belief system. How do you pick the right one?

**Series Recap**

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

Let me remind you today that our desire is not to convince anyone of anything, but to invite everyone to explore these questions together. And today’s question is one that many people in our modern world wonder: “**Is Christianity too narrow?”**

**Coexist**

Now, I don't actually think having lots of choices when it comes to the grocery store or clothing or restaurants is a bad thing. All of those choices can be nice. As they say, “Variety is the spice of life.” But what do we do with that same amount of choice when it comes to religion? What do we do when faced with the complicated landscape of religious pluralism?

*(Coexist Sticker)* Our culture has increasingly responded by calling for more tolerance. Many of you have probably seen this bumper sticker before, right? This “coexist” graphic says, *“Let’s just all get along! Whatever works for you, works for you. Whatever works for me, works for me. Just be nice and kind and everything will be alright.”* And to most reasonable people, that sounds pretty good, doesn't it?

Legendary songwriter John Lennon sang about this concept all the way back in 1971:

*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*

As human beings, all of us *should* do our very best to *not* be divisive, to *not* oppress, to *not* be hurtful to other people. Can’t we all agree that this is a good goal? No doubt our world would be better if we could get this idea right.

And yet, does that mean that every belief system, every religion is equally valid? What if there are real differences among these religions that have real consequences in a person’s life…both life in the here and now and life forever? Is choosing a religion like picking a box of Cheerios? Or are there much more important realities at stake?

**Religious Paths to Eternal Life**

Now, I know that there are some here today who fully support the “whatever works for you” movement. After all, a Pew Research Institute study found that even **52% of American Christians think that at least some non-Christian faiths can lead to eternal life.** 52%! That’s the majority of American Christians.[[1]](#endnote-1)

And, I also know there are also those here today who follow a different religion than Christianity. I do want to acknowledge that there are some really wonderful things that we *all* can learn from other religions and belief systems. We short-change ourselves if we write someone off just because we don’t think, act, or practice in the same ways. Can we all agree to that? *(Ask for affirmative response)*

However, there are significant differences between religions that we just can’t ignore. For example, let’s look at what various religions teach about how to find your way back to God and the path to eternal life.

* **Orthodox Judaism** says that a person has to obey 613 different commands in order to please God. Obedience to the law is the path to heaven.
* *(add)* **Islam** has the 5 pillars. 5 might sound a lot better than 613, but the 5 pillars are still about how you work your way to heaven.
* *(add)* **Buddhism** is all about the ultimate goal of achieving nirvana. And one gets there by working toward an elimination of all desire.
* *(add)* **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 he or she gets it right.

Very different paths. Very different teachings. In fact, there are two major observations that we can make based on this information.

* **Observation #1: Each of these religions provides their own *unique* path.** Each of these religions has a belief system about eternal life and how to achieve it. That means that every religion is “narrow” so to speak. There are guidelines, restrictions, and specific direction for each of these religions that differ from the others. However,
* **Observation #2: Each of these religions** has something in common – each **teaches it’s all up to you and your own effort.** Whether that effort is obedience or eliminating desire or attempts at a moral life…your ability (or failure) to hit the target determines your destiny.

In fact, we could say that the one thing these religions have in common is **“DOING”** … Measure up. Meet requirements. Do enough and you’re in.

It is sort of like buying airline tickets... If you are willing to pay more, you can have a better experience. Now, I have never flown first class but I am told it is amazing! You get the best service, you don’t have to wait in lines, and sometimes you can even get access to 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 if you do enough, you’ll get a good seat in eternity.

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

**The Uniqueness of Christianity**

And this is why the message Jesus came to bring was so strikingly different…both in his day and in ours.

Now I know there are lots of different perspectives on what Christianity is and what it teaches. Sometimes when we turn on the television and hear someone speaking on behalf of “Christians,” we can cringe more than we clap. So today I want to make sure you know what I’m talking about when I talk about “Christianity.”

Jesus stands at the center of Christianity. Everything in the Christian religion hinges on what Jesus said (his claims) and what he has done (his actions). That’s why around here we talk about being Christ-followers. A Christ-follower is someone who follows Jesus…who puts his or her faith in what Jesus said and what Jesus does.

So what did Jesus say?

Jesus clamed to be the only way to eternal life with God. In John 14:6 he says:

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

Jesus claims to be *the* way. Not a way. *The* way. He claims to be the exclusive connection between sinful humanity and God, the Father. Jesus says, “Follow me, I am the way!”

And what did Jesus do?

He made it possible for us to find our way back to God by opening up the way to eternal life. You see, our sin, our failures had separated us from God. None of us has lived a perfect life. All of us have turned our back on God and in our selfishness followed our own desires.

Paul, an early church leader who wrote much of the New Testament of the Bible puts it this way:

**“…for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God…” –Romans 3:23**

No matter how hard we tried to be good…and let’s face it, some of us didn’t try very hard ☺… we fell short.

But here’s what Jesus did… he couldn’t stand the thought of you and I living life apart from God so he came after us. Think of it like this…

*(TP can draw this on a flipchart or use the PPT images)*

*(Picture of two ledges – “Us” on left side and “God” on the right)*

If we are here *(left side)* and eternal life with God is over there *(right side).* Every other religion is an expression of our attempt to get to God. *(As you say the following bullet points, draw three arrows from “Us” to “God” but have them fall short of making it to the other side.)*

* We attempt to keep the rules to get to the God.
* We try to eliminate desire to get to the other side.
* We try to live a good, moral life to get over there.

But all our attempts come up short.

Jesus looked at this chasm and said, “I’ll come to you.” *(Draw an arrow from “God” to “Us” that does span the gap and label it “Jesus”)*

Jesus came to earth. He lived among us. He showed us what God is like because he *is* God. And when the religious leaders saw him as a threat to their power systems, he came face to face with all the ugliness and rebellion of the human heart. He was sentenced to die. He willingly laid down his life, dying on a cross. Our sin cost Jesus his life. And yet, he was not defeated. He rose from the dead proving he has power over sin and death itself.

And now he offers a free gift of eternal life to all who would receive it. Again, Paul says it this way:

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

When we accept what Jesus has done for us, we are forgiven. We receive eternal life as a free gift. *A free gift*. I don’t know what you feel when you hear that expression, ‘free gift.’ I know for me, I can 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, don’t you?

And so we’re suspicious. We think there must be a catch. But, there isn’t a catch. It *is* free. Jesus offers eternal life to all who will put their faith in him.

And you see that’s what makes the message of Christianity so unique. Every other religion says that it is about **“DOING”**. Eternal life is reserved for those who work hard enough, obey enough, do enough…those are the ones who will reach God.

But Christianity says that it’s about what has been **“DONE”**.

Christianity is kind of like a front row, first-class ticket that you didn’t pay for. Jesus already paid the fare. No matter who you are… rich or poor, black or white, male or female. Regardless of where you live or what degrees hang on your wall, Jesus came for you.

Is Christianity narrow? Yes, of course it is. All religions are. But it is not “too” narrow because it is also radically inclusive. The invitation of Jesus is the most radically inclusive invitation ever given. The doors are wide open. Entry is not based on your qualifications. You can come exactly as you are. It’s not about what you have or what you can achieve. It’s about what has been done for you by Jesus on the cross.

And when you put your faith in Jesus and what he said and what he has done, you can begin to experience the life he came to bring *right now*. You see, eternal life is not something just reserved for after you die. No, eternal life is meant to be a kind of life we live right now and forever in a close, personal relationship with God.

“I have come for you!” Jesus says. “You can find your way back to God through me!”

**Story: Versions of the Prodigal Son**

There is a famous story about finding your way back to God recorded by the historian Luke in the book he wrote about Jesus’ life. It is often referred to as “The Story of the Prodigal Son.” My guess is some of you are familiar with the story, but you may not know that there is actually a Buddhist version of this story.

In both versions there is a father who has a son and the son leaves home to go chase after his own desires. Eventually, the son runs out of money and hits rock bottom and decides to return to the house of his father.

And yet, in the Buddhist version of this story, the son stumbles into his father’s house and is welcomed back…but just as the lowest of his employees. His job? Well, he is assigned to shovel excrement…which he does…for 20 long years. For 20 years he shovels feces until he is finally accepted back into the father’s good graces.

Jesus’ version of the story is much different. In Jesus’ story, when the Father sees his son approaching on the horizon, what does the Father do? He takes off running. “I’ll come to you!” the Father says. And when he reaches his son, he embraces him. He kisses him. And when the son offers to work his way back into the Father’s good graces, the Father says, “That’s ridiculous! You are my son. We’re throwing a party!”

One story is about “DOING.” The other story is about “DONE.”

**Conclusion**

Jesus came for us and DID everything required for all people to find their way back to God. Now every single one of us can know God and live an eternal kind of life both now and forever.

Is Christianity too narrow for the world today? Not at all. It’s exactly what the world needs. The message of Christianity goes far beyond the notion of mere tolerance to radical inclusion. You don’t have to “measure up.” You don’t have to “meet requirements.” You don’t have to “do enough” to get in.

Jesus invites all people to find their way back to God by accepting what he has already done.

He is the God who runs to you, embraces you, kisses you, and welcomes you back to where you’ve always belonged.

**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.

1. Pew Research Center, "Many Americans Say Other Faiths Can Lead to Eternal Life" at <http://www.pewforum.org/2008/12/18/many-americans-say-other-faiths-can-lead-to-eternal-life/> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)