

## Reasons We Don't Believe

*Jesus Can't be the Only Way*

Romans 3:21-26 | John 14:1-6

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*<sup>21</sup> But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— <sup>22</sup> the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: <sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, <sup>24</sup> and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, <sup>25</sup> whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. <sup>26</sup> It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (Romans 3:21–26).*

Today we are beginning a three-week sermon series entitled “Reasons We Don’t Believe.” In January and February we learned about the biblical vision for multiplication. We considered how the work of Jesus continued through His disciples and the church. We looked for some key ingredients that should characterize our lives and our church as we consider why God has brought us together.

As we begin to take the mission of multiplication seriously, and as we engage with people intentionally, we are bound to run into some challenges. We’ll likely face particular questions or struggles that people might have with the claims of Christianity. In some cases, there can actually be barriers to belief—things that might really hinder people when it comes to believing in Jesus. It would be good to know how to answer these objections.

The challenge, however, is not just for those who are not yet Christians. These questions and struggles can become a barrier in talking about belief even if you are a follower of Jesus. For instance, you might be reluctant to talk about your faith because you’re afraid that you’ll be asked a question for which you don’t know the answer or one that seems to discredit what you believe. The result is either a timid posture or possible silence.

We are less than a month from Easter weekend, and I’m hoping that you’ll invite someone to come to church with you. I’m praying that these next three weeks will encourage and embolden you to embrace God’s mission in your life with a new level of confidence.

I also hope that you’ll invite someone over in the next three weeks as we talk about questions related to the trust-worthiness of the Bible and the problem of evil in the world. You don’t need to wait until Easter to invite someone. And if you are here already exploring the claims of Christ, I hope these three weeks will help you understand more about the Christian faith and what it means to have a relationship with Jesus.

In this message, I want to take up the statement *Jesus Can't be the Only Way*, by looking at the cultural context, the nature of the problem, and the biblical solution.

## The Cultural Context

Before we dive into the text, let me set the scene for you so that you understand why this statement is important and common. Perhaps you've heard someone say something like this:

*How can there be just one true faith? It's arrogant to say your religion is superior and try to convert everyone else to it. Surely all religions are equally good and valid for meeting the needs of their particular followers.<sup>1</sup>*

Or perhaps another person connects *Jesus is the Only Way* to bigger issues—like world peace.

*Religious exclusivity is not just narrow—it's dangerous. Religion has led to untold strife, division, and conflict. It may be the greatest enemy of peace in the world. If Christians continue to insist that they have the 'the truth' – and if other religions do this as well—the world will never know peace.<sup>2</sup>*

The core issue is the exclusivity of Christ—the belief that Jesus is the only way for people to be right with God. Now this is not an inference of a biblical principle, it is exactly what Jesus said in John 14.

<sup>6</sup> *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)*

If Jesus' statement is taken as true, then all other faith systems are not only wrong, but they are spiritually deceptive. They are leading people to believe in something that will not cause them to truly love God or to be reconciled to Him. But there's more. The Bible teaches a coming judgment and eternal destinies of heaven or hell. The exclusivity of Christ means that what a person does with Jesus' claim in John 14 makes the difference in their eternal destiny.

The title of today's sermon—*Jesus Can't be the Only Way*—is a far more common belief because it fits into the prevailing ethical system of our culture. Tim Keller, in his book *The Reason for God*, identifies several cultural axioms.<sup>3</sup> In other words, this is what most non-Christians believe about what Christians believe:

- "All major religions are equally valid and basically teach the same thing"
- "Every religion sees part of the spiritual truth, but none can see the whole truth"
- "Religious belief is too culturally and historically conditioned to be the 'truth'"
- "It is arrogant to insist your religion is right and to convert others to it"
- "Religion is a private matter"

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*, (New York: Riverhead Books, 2008), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Keller, 7-20.

I'm sure that you've either faced these realities in a subtle way, heard them posited through the media, or have had someone directly make one of these statements. We don't have time to walk through a refutation of every one of those axioms. If you are interested in full treatment, I'd commend Keller's book to you.

My reason for identifying these axioms is two-fold:

First, I think it is helpful to understand the dominant cultural worldview. It helps us to have better answers but also to talk about the gospel in a way that is winsome. Second, I've found it helpful (and empowering) to realize that each of those five axioms is also exclusive. To believe those axioms requires the exclusion of alternative views.

I was interviewing Ravi Zacharias during THINK week, and I asked him about the exclusivity of Christ. He replied, "Every religion has exclusive beliefs." Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, agnostics, and even atheists are exclusive in what they believe. The reason is quite simple: in order for something to be believed as true, something must also be believed as false. Or, as Walter Martin, in his book *The Kingdom of Cults*, says, "Truth by definition is exclusive. If truth were all-inclusive, nothing would be false."<sup>4</sup>

As we think about how to engage our culture and talk to people about the good news of the gospel, it is important to understand the cultural context in which we are living. Every culture has beliefs underneath the surface which inform how life is interpreted and lived. The issue is not *if* there are beliefs embedded in our culture; it is a matter of what those beliefs actually are.

No matter if you are old or young, educated or uneducated, skeptic or believer, we all live out of some belief system. Every human being, whether they know it or not, has a narrative connected to what should not be done and what should be done.

But among all the challenges for Christianity, the charge of exclusivity—*Jesus Can't be the Only Way*—is one of the reasons why it is hard for some to believe. Now that we understand the context, let's see if we can make some progress on this issue.

### **The Problem for Humanity**

I've chosen to look at Romans 3:21-26 today because it is one of the clearest passages in the Bible as to the problem of humanity and the solution that is offered to us through the person and work of Jesus Christ. Martin Luther believed this text to be the heart of the entire New Testament.

As it relates to the problem with humanity, the most critical statements are found in verses 21, 23, and 25. Here is what they say: ". . . the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law" (3:21), "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (3:23), and ". . . in his divine forbearance he has passed over former sins" (3:25). These statements identify the problem of mankind.

To make this clear, let me highlight six observations related to the Christian view of humanity:

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2017/may/one-path-evangelism-scandalizing-exclusivity-of-jesus.html>

**Something is wrong with the world.** While there are wonderful elements of beauty and love and peace, it doesn't take long until you notice that something is not right with the world. Beauty fades, love can be broken, and peace can be shattered. Death, cancer, natural disasters, broken relationships, and even the presence of guilt are all signals that something is wrong with the world.

**God is revealing what He is like and what we are like.** The book of Romans is a doctrinal summary of the revelation of God's existence, His glory, and the guilt of mankind. Romans 1 tells us that God's existence is clearly seen in creation (1:20), and that humans intentionally suppress the truth about God (1:19).

**Every human being is a sinner.** Romans 3:23 states this very clearly. It simply says, "all have sinned." In Romans 3:10 it says, "None is righteous, no, not one." What does this mean? At one level most people would understand sin as doing something that violates one of God's commands. That would be true. Lying, stealing, or cheating on one's spouse are all sinful. Every human being has broken God's rules. And this is true not only by our experience, but it is hard-wired into our humanity. No one has to teach a child to selfishly say "mine." We do bad things naturally.

But there's more. The Bible identifies that God's glory is the most worthy and beautiful reality in the universe. No one deserves worship but Him because no one is like Him (Rev. 4:11). But we sin not only by our unholy actions but also by misplaced affections. The Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard asserted "that human beings were made to love God supremely, center their lives on him above anything else, and build their very identities on him. Anything other than this is sin."<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the problem with sin is not just doing bad things, but the making of good things into ultimate things.<sup>6</sup>

**We've all fallen short of God's glory.** The effect is that God is holy, and we are not. He is perfect, and we have sinned. What God is, we are not. And since He is the creator of the universe, this difference between God and mankind is dangerous—eternally dangerous.

**The wages of sin is death.** In Romans 6:23, Paul expands on the effects of sin in the world. He says that "the wages of sin is death." The word for wages is taken from the sternly-earned payment that was given to soldiers.<sup>7</sup> Sin creates a debt. And the cost is death. The price is brokenness around us, physical death, and even eternal punishment. Remember this point for the next section.

**The law doesn't produce righteousness.** According to Romans 3:21, true righteousness does not come from human effort. It is "apart from the law." In other words, human obedience is never enough to create righteousness or complete enough for it to be purely righteous. It is impossible for human beings by their actions to balance the scales of justice with their good works.

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<sup>5</sup> Keller, 168.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Robert H. Mounce, *Romans*, vol. 27, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995)

Even if you could perform the quantity of good works needed to adjust the balance sheet of your life, you would find yourself proud of yourself that you did it.

While on vacation I read the short story of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.<sup>8</sup> It is the fictional account of a man who develops a potion to turn him from a good and kind man named Jekyll and a horrible man named Hyde. The character loves the control and the freedom that it gives him. But it isn't long until Mr. Hyde gets worse and more violent. After he kills a man as Hyde, he resolves to no longer turn himself into Hyde. It works. Jekyll believes he has beaten his "dark-side."

One day he is sitting in a park watching people, and he begins to compare himself to other men: ". . . and then I smiled, comparing myself with other men, comparing my active good-will with the lazy cruelty of their neglect."<sup>9</sup> Suddenly, he felt strange, and much to his horror, he had once again transformed in Edward Hyde. Jekyll's pride had become his new potion. And he became Mr. Hyde permanently.

Robert Lewis Stephenson, the author, is attempting to wrestle with the reality of the human condition. Through fiction he identifies the internal war that takes place in the heart of every human being. A "Hyde" lurks within every Jekyll.

This is how Christianity diagnoses the human condition. It identifies that something is wrong with the world. The problem is sin—"all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). The effect is death—both physical and eternal. Humanity is in trouble. And we cannot get ourselves out of the mess of our own making. Understanding the problem as revealed in the Bible and in our experience points us toward the right solution.

Al Mohler, the President of Southern Seminary, said it like this:

If all we need is a teacher of enlightenment, the Buddha will do. If all we need is a collection of gods for every occasion and need and hope, Hinduism will do. If all we need is a lawgiver, Moses will do. If all we need is a set of rules and a way of devotion, Muhammad or Joseph Smith will do. If all we need is inspiration and insight into the sovereign self . . . Oprah will do. But if we need a savior, only Jesus will do.<sup>10</sup>

Let me show you why that is true.

### **The Solution of the Cross**

Jesus is the only way for people to be made right with God. Jesus is the only way that people are forgiven of their sins. Jesus is the only way that people are saved from eternal judgment. Now, in order

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<sup>8</sup> I read this after reading *The Reason for God* and seeing how Keller used it as a vivid illustration.

<sup>9</sup> Stevenson, Robert Louis. *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (Kindle Locations 877-878). Kindle Edition.

<sup>10</sup> <https://baptistnews.com/article/mohler-defends-exclusivity-of-christ/#.WphaapPwbfY>

to understand how this works and why it only works in reference to Jesus, we need to understand four key phrases:

**The righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe (3:22).** This short statement is the antithesis to the problem of trying to achieve a righteousness based upon works. Here is the goal of the gospel. It to grant people the righteousness that belongs to God—the righteousness that no one has (3:10), the righteousness that is apart from the law (3:21).

God’s plan is to give this righteousness to people outside of their activities or works. And that is why the text uses words like “faith” and “believe.” The Christian faith, unlike every other faith, requires that you place your full confidence and your absolute trust in someone else. And of course, that person is Jesus.

The righteousness that was lost because of the sinfulness of mankind can be restored. But not by works that we accomplish. It only happens by believing in Jesus. Therefore, Jesus is the only way, because no one else accomplished what He did. No one else rose from the dead. A few weeks from now we’ll celebrate Easter Sunday. It is an important Sunday, not only because people will come if you invite them. It is one of the Sundays that people are willing to consider making their way into church—as if the cultural worldview is allowed to be challenged. But it is also important because it marks the single event that makes Jesus distinct from every religious leader or teacher. He rose from the dead, and because of that, no one else is worthy to be trusted this way. No one can be trusted this way.

**Justified by His grace as a gift (3:24).** The next phrase continues this theme by adding the words justification and grace into the mix. Justification means to be declared righteous. The concept has a legal connection as if one’s record has been expunged. But it also might help you to think about it as a change of identity. To be justified means that God grants you a new relationship with Him based upon your status as a forgiven person. And the miracle of Christianity is the fact that God grants this to people as a gift. He graces people with righteousness. He gives them an identity that doesn’t belong to them, one they could have never earned.

The result is found in Romans 8:1—“There is therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

But you might wonder *How can God do this?*

**Whom God put forward as a propitiation by His blood (3:25).** The word “propitiation” means satisfaction or appeasement. The Bible tells us that Jesus was the only way the scales of divine justice could be balanced. Let me explain by talking about forgiveness.

By definition, “forgiveness” means not just absolving someone else from the debt that they owe you, but requiring you to absorb the debt yourself. Let me give you an example in a non-spiritual category. I learned this when I built a house in Michigan. Nothing about the house was free. Every part of the house, everything we added, everything that wasn’t right or that had to be fixed cost someone something. Either we paid, the builder paid, or the sub-contractor paid. Someone always paid.

Or consider if your child backs the car out of the garage, breaking a side mirror. The mirror has to be replaced, and if you forgive your child's mistake, you will pay for it. Forgiveness doesn't mean no one pays. It means someone who shouldn't pay the price takes the cost. And that is what Jesus did. He bore the cost of forgiveness. He created the possibility of the appeasement of justice.

Some people might ask "Why can't God just forgive us?" Here's the answer: "No one 'just' forgives, if the evil is serious. Forgiveness means bearing the cost instead of making the wrongdoer do it, so you can reach out in love and seek your enemy's renewal and change."<sup>11</sup> The cross was necessary because of the cosmic debt of sin. "There was a debt to be paid—God Himself paid it. There was a penalty to be born—God Himself bore it."<sup>12</sup>

**It was to show His righteousness at the present time, so that He might be just and justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (3:26).** This final verse helps us to see that there is a much bigger plan and issue at stake here. The plan is not ultimately about us. The story of the gospel is the way in which God is showing the world what His righteousness is like. By redeeming people this way, God isn't being narrow. Rather, He's showing the world what selfless, humble, and loving righteousness is all about.

Yet you might wonder why God must have Jesus die. This verse helps us understand. The cross is the intersection of justice and justification. If God simply forgave sin without a payment, He would cease to be just. In the same way, a judge is required to issue penalties. If she stops sentencing, we have no justice. Without justice, there is no society. In the same way, without payment for sin, God cannot be just.

What is the solution? What is the ONLY solution? It is for God to pay the debt Himself. Therefore, the second member of the Triune Godhead, out of a great love for the glory of God and for humanity became a man. He humbled himself by becoming a baby. He lived a sinless life. He submitted Himself to death—the punishment that He didn't deserve. For what purpose?

The sinless Son of God died so that His death could be applied to anyone who would put their faith and trust in Him. And in that act of sacrifice, God is able to be both just and justifier. The scales of justice are balanced, and God grants rebellious sinners a forgiveness they didn't deserve.

Jesus is the only one who can do that. No one else is the God/man. No one else lived without sin and died for others. He is the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Him.

And once you believe this, it changes everything.

In Christ I could know I was accepted by grace not only despite my flaws, but because I was willing to admit them. The Christian gospel is that I am so flawed that Jesus had to die for me, yet I am so loved and valued...that Jesus was glad to die for me. This leads to deep humility and deep confidence at the same time. It undermines both swaggering and sniveling. I cannot feel

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<sup>11</sup> Keller, 199.

<sup>12</sup> Keller, 200.

superior to anyone, and yet I have nothing to prove to anyone. I do not think more of myself nor less of myself. Instead, I think of myself less.<sup>13</sup>

Jesus is the only way for that to happen. He is the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through him (John 14:6).

Is that exclusive? Yes!

Amazingly so.

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<sup>13</sup> Keller, 187.