

Introduction: Pg. ____

Last Saturday, I went on a 2 mile hike with some friends up Mt. Wachusett!! We started at the base of Mountain House Trail and soon discovered there was an incline substantial enough to break a sweat and cause our lungs to become slightly overworked (at least for some of us - not naming names).

When we got to the top (it's hard to call it a "summit" considering we were only 2,000 feet in the air), but when we got to the top, I . . . I noticed a couple of things. #1) though we were 57 mile drive west of the city, there is a really cool view of Boston skyline from that distance. 2) Though we hike up Mountain House Trail, when we arrived at the top, there were a lot more people there than seemed to be walking our trail. That was indeed the case because surrounding the summit were several trails that led to the top.

Here's what I want you to consider: This is how most people in our culture view the pursuit of God. Just as all of these trails lead to the top of the mountain, so all paths of spirituality, religion and enlightenment lead to the same Ultimate Reality.

In short, there are many ways to God. This is known as religious **pluralism = all religions are equally capable of salvation or liberation, none being superior to another.**

This view is becoming increasingly popular because due to the doubt or denial of absolute truth. Relativism is on the rise, which says specific points of view have no absolute truth or validity to them. "That's true *for you*, but I have my own truth." The influence of globalization, with people from different cultures traveling and communicating through technology like never before, as well as immigration and urbanization. People all over the world are moving into cities. 27.1% of Boston residents were born outside of America. That's why this is such a strategic city to invest your life.

Though pluralism is increasingly prevalent in our culture, it does not align with historic Christianity. Though it is often difficult to be a Christian in our culture, the gospel spread like wildfire in a pluralistic context filled with the worship of competing ideologies and the emperor himself.

FCF: So here's the question I want us to consider this morning . . .

"Is Jesus a Generous Liberator or a Restrictive Oppressor?"
Isaiah 61:1-3

Isaiah 61:1-3 is going to show us that . . .

The Point: Jesus is a Generous Liberator who came to set people free.

I. Understand the Mission of Jesus was a Mission of Liberation (61:1).

Isaiah 61:1 - "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me"

- This language of anointing is a huge clue that these words are a messianic announcement. The Jews anticipated a coming deliverer who would set things right for their nation.
- Isaiah 60 just spoke of the blessings the coming city of God will enjoy. Now Isaiah 61 tells us who will bring those blessings.
- The Jews expected the Messiah to bring physical deliverance and physical blessing. They really thought this would come about in a geo-political sense, but what Isaiah pictures forth and what

we find in Jesus is a Messiah who brings both physical and spiritual blessing beyond all expectation.

- And make no mistake, Luke 4 tells us that Jesus entered the synagogue in the early days of his public ministry and he read this passage, and declared:
 - Today this is fulfilled in your midst.
 - What was he saying? I am the Messiah.
 - That's what the word "Christ" actually means. = Messiah. Christ is not Jesus' last name. It is his title, his identity.
 - Jesus, the Christ.
- He was empowered by the Spirit of God to accomplish his mission of liberation.
- Jesus did not come to restrict... He came *"to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;"*

Jesus came—not to end your freedom—but to give you freedom.

- **"For freedom Christ has set us free." (Gal 5:1a)**
- In John 8, Jesus talks about this himself: **"So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, 32 and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. . . . So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed." (John 8:31-36)**
- Jesus, the Messiah, lived and bled and died so that we can be free. He rose from the dead so that we can be free.

It is ironic then, that often what troubles people the most about Christianity, is the "scandal of its exclusivity."

Again. This is the charge of the religious relativist.

- "There are many ways to God."
- "To each his own."
- "That's true for you but not for me,"
- "Who are *you* to say that someone else is wrong?"

Here are **Four common Beliefs** of those who hold a **pluralistic worldview**:

1) "All religions basically teach the same thing."

- Honestly, this one is simply the result of being naive, uninformed or dishonest.
- If you sit me down with a Rabbi, Imam, Buddhist priest and ask us if we believe the same things, you will get a resounding: "no."
- One of the classic posters of pluralism is the **Golden Rule Poster (PIC)**, proudly displayed in the Interfaith Offices at Tufts University last time I checked. And this is not an altogether bad thing. We should not be surprised to find pieces of truth in other religions because "all truth is God's truth."
- Common grace tells us if we all treat each other like we want to be treated, the world would be a better place.
- BUT, let's not pretend agreement on this one thing means all religions teach the same thing.
- This is the height of reductionism.

2) "Each religion sees part of spiritual truth, but none can see the whole truth."

- The classic argument here is **the "Blind Men and the Elephant" (PIC)** I love what Leslie Newbigin says about this pluralistic take on life and religion.

- “There is an appearance of humility in the protestation that the truth is much greater than any one of us can grasp, but if this is used to invalidate all claims to discern the truth it is in fact an arrogant claim to a kind of knowledge which is superior to [all others] . . . We have to ask ‘What is the [absolute] vantage ground from which you claim to be able to relativize all the absolute claims these different scriptures make?’”
- In other words: you just took the perspective, you say no one holds. = Inconsistent.

3) “Religious belief is too culturally and historically conditioned to be ‘truth.’”

- That’s a fancy way of someone saying: “You’re only a Christian because you were born in America.” Or “He’s only a Muslim because he was born in Morocco.”
- BUT as Alvin Plantinga, philosophy professor at Notre Dame, says: “the same goes for the pluralist. . . . If a pluralist had been born in [Morocco] he probably wouldn’t be a pluralist. Does it follow that . . . His pluralist beliefs are produced in him by an unreliable belief-producing process?” (Keller, 11)
- The geography of a belief proves it neither true nor false.
- We all have a responsibility to weigh all truth claims with great carefulness.

4) “It’s arrogant to say you have the truth but billions of other people don’t.”

- Well, it could be loving and generous because we sincerely believe it to be true and deeply want them to know the real-time and eternal benefits that come from knowing God through Christ.
- But . . . Is it not just as arrogant to say your truth claim of everyone or no one having the truth is right?
- That’s the irony. Relativistic views of truth are self-defeating.
- As Peter Berger says, “**Relativity relativizes itself all the way down.**”

The Pushback against Pluralism: The Life and Teaching of Jesus

Your problem is really with Jesus, not me.

- The identity claims and teaching of Christ were and remain staggering. He made claims no other world religious leader made.
- Jesus claimed to be the Son of God. He said he shared the same essence as God the Father. “I and the Father are one.”
- He forgave sin. He received worship. He exercised authority over demons and death.
- Most clearly of all, just before his death in John 14, Jesus told his disciples he was about to go away to the Father and that he’d prepare a place for them. **“One of his disciples named Thomas said: ‘Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?’ Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.’ (John 14:5-6)**
- These are not the words of someone who believed he was merely a prophet, sage, or wise teacher.
- Each person must ultimately contend with Jesus’ identity claims about himself. They must be dismissed or embraced.

T: If Jesus is who he says he was, and if he really rose from the dead, then we cannot lump the Christian path to God in with all other paths. I hope you will understand Jesus’ mission was a mission of liberation.

#2

II. Experience the freedom of Christ by receiving his gifts (61:1-3).

As we continue in this description of the Messiah's mission, we see just how strong the personal benefits are for us.

Verses 1-3

The Messiah brings good news of God's triumph . . .

- to the poor = "connotation of the term is not restricted to financial or material conditions." The term seems comprehensive. To the materially poor, the Messiah brings hope. To the spiritually poor, the Messiah brings salvation.

The Messiah . . .

- *bind up the brokenhearted,*
 - Work that imagery!!! Bind up wounds...
- *to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;*
 - "Only a king greater than all those other who hold his people captive can make such an announcement."

And this comes by grace! . . .

- *to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, "Favor = grace"*
 - *Here's a question: "How do I know if I've done enough?" He's done enough!!*
 - My Grandad taught me the difference between Christianity and all other paths to God. (Do vs. Did)
 - This is also what makes Jesus the exclusive path to salvation . . .
- *and [to proclaim] the day of vengeance of our God; "Vengeance = justice;"*
 - Do you want wrongs to be made right? Me too. It's coming, thanks to Messiah Jesus. That's not all . . .
- *[and] to comfort all who mourn;*
 - Matthew 5:7 - those who mourn for their own sin and the brokenness around them, will be comforted by Christ himself. Wow! God doesn't say, "Suck it up. Stop being a baby." He wraps his arms around us.
- *T: Now look at verse 3 . . .*
- *to grant to those who mourn in Zion—to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit;*
- Zoom in on this . . .
- Jesus came to give beauty in place of ashes. (A beautiful celebration in place of repentance)
- Jesus came to give gladness instead of mourning, praise instead of being weary.
- This turns all "duty" into delight! This turns ought into want!

In light of this picture of generosity and benevolent kindness, it drives me crazy when people charge Christianity with being exclusive and restrictive.

- 1) We exclude ourselves. We turn away. We reject God... If we understood the holiness of God and the depths of our sin, we would not be amazed that some are excluded. We would be amazed that any of us are included.
- 2) There's not a person on the planet God does not desire to save.

"Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price." (Isaiah 55:1)

The invitation is to all. The cost is free.

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16)

The invitation is to all. The cost is free.

I don't have time to tell you about Memphibosheth eating at the table of the King in 2 Samuel 9 or the host of Psalm 23, or how Ezekiel 18 tells us that God has no pleasure in the death of the wicked, or the parables of Jesus in the gospel where he invites the lame, crippled and blind, or how Jesus sat down with tax collectors and prostitutes and invited them into the kingdom or how he forgave a thief who was dying next to him on the cross and invited him to accept the free gift of eternal life, or how people from every nation, tribe, people and language are gathering around the throne of Christ because he welcomes them all, or how Revelation ends with the same invitation we just read in Isaiah 55.

I wish I had time to tell you about all of that.

T: Jesus wants everyone [let me rephrase that - Jesus wants YOU] to experience the freedom of his magnificent gifts.

III. Light up the radiance of God by reflecting his strength and beauty (61:3).

T: The result of embracing the work of Christ is this . . .

His people become “Oaks of righteousness,”

- Strength, stability, permanence, abundance
- The brokenness of moral relativity... relativity is just that... ever changing...

We become . . . “The planting of the Lord,”

- This is God's doing . . .

And this is why: “That he may be glorified”

- We light God up by living particular kind of lives. That's why we should welcome rather than resist God's instruction, guidance, dare I say, his authoritative commands.

When people view following the moral commands and example of Jesus as something designed to restrict us, it drives me bananas! Why?

- Because every command he gives comes from the fact that he is the God of all knowledge and the God of all wisdom.
- We don't commend parents who provide no instruction, no guidance, no commands to their children, but when it comes to us before God. Ssshhhh, I got this. How ridiculous.
- God gives us his commands for our good out of his infinite wisdom. That's why we can gladly hand him over the keys to our lives and welcome his moral standards.
- Here's what I'm saying: “God, tell me what to do!”

- My neighbor, Art is a self-proclaimed gear-head. He loves cars and especially, motorcycles. I don't go across the street into Art's garage and say, “Hey, Artie, let me show you a thing or two about bikes.” I barely know how to start my car.

What else does it mean that “Jesus is our Lord.” He calls the shots . . . but here’s the paradox: in surrender we find freedom. In losing our lives we find them. In giving ourselves over to Christ, we gain EVERYTHING.

- Why? Because like the ship was made for the ocean, like the bird was made for the sky, we were made for him!
- True freedom requires a measure of restriction doesn’t it. We only thrive when we live according to our design. Consider the fish. “because it absorbs oxygen from water rather than air, is only free if it is restricted and limited to water.” Take a fish out of water and you don’t give it a better existence, you destroy it.
- We were made to be sons and daughters of God. We were made to live on him and for him. Now in Christ, we can live out our true design and true purpose.

Conclusion: Let’s conclude with this: How can we **Speak with Others about Faith?**

Because we are free in Christ, all fear is removed. Now we are free to do three things that should control our disposition toward others . . .

Free to listen

- Historically, tolerance has referred to “the acceptance of the existence of different views.” We welcome people’s rights to disagree with us and hold different beliefs.
- Today, tolerance means “the acceptance of different views.” Now, we have to accept everyone’s views as equal. It’s not enough to have equal respect. We must say that truth is relative, no one is right or wrong, which is neither fair or rationale.
- According to the classic view of tolerance, Christians should be the most tolerant people on the planet.
- We are to be FULL of respect, graciousness, interest, concern, and compassion.

Free to love

- Because we have been loved so greatly, we are free to love others with the love we have received from God. If we fail to love our neighbor, we are hypocrites.
- But as we love, the most loving thing we can do is share the truth of what we believe with humility and sincerity.
- If Jesus is the one who brings true freedom, it is not intolerant or unkind to say he is *the* way to God. It is actually the epitome of kindness. Finally, we are . . .

Free to live.

- As we model the rare attributes of peace, integrity, & joy, our friends of other faiths should not only enter into meaningful dialogue with us, but we pray they will see the real transformation Jesus brings and long to experience the same.

If you are included in Christ, you should carry the deepest desire to see others included in him.

- As Micah & our team lead us to respond, that’s my invitation to you today. In Christ, we get what we do not deserve and we get more than we deserve.
- Jesus died on a Roman Cross, Redemption’s Hill, so that you could Come, without money and without price and be forever satisfied in him.

Prayer: John 10:10: “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”