

## UNLESS

John 8:21-36

(outline from Timothy Keller, "Reason for God: The Exclusivity of Truth," A Place for Truth, ed. Dallas Willard)

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Today's sermon is not the sort that will appeal to all people. Today I'm going to tug at your head – and not so much at your heart. But there are "head" people here who aren't moved by rousing rhetoric, poetical pleas, or touching stories. There are some people who, if you're going to reach them for Jesus, you have to go cerebral for them. And today's sermon is for our thinkers. So if you don't like to think, just take a nap and tell the person beside you to nudge you when we get to the hymn of invitation.

Jesus is telling the crowd that He is going to go away and that where He is going, they cannot come. In this passage we have two of the "I am" sayings – which, in itself, should highlight the power of this passage.

You'll remember that in John's gospel we have the "I am" sayings. "I AM" is the name for God. Yahweh means "I AM" or "the God who is." Jesus says in this gospel, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." He says, "I am the light of the world." He says, "I am the good shepherd." And sometimes He just says, "I am...."

Look at verse 24

I said therefore to you, that you shall die in your sins' for unless you believe that *I am* He, you shall die in your sins.

And then verse 28

When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that *I am* He, and I do nothing on My own initiative, but I speak these things as the Father taught Me.

"You will die in your sin" (v. 21) means the sin of unbelief. It's singular. There is one sin – the sin of not believing Jesus as the Son of God – that leads to all other sin. You see, the reality is you live life one of two ways. You live life God-centered, in which you try to be obedient to His word, or you live life self-centered, beginning with the sin of saying that you know more than God, you know more than His Son.

Some in the crowd think that Jesus is contemplating suicide. Look at verse 22: "Surely He will not kill Himself, will He, since He says, 'Where I am going, you cannot come?'" The reality is He's not speaking of taking His own life. But, in an ominous way, He's speaking of their taking their own lives because, as they persist in refusing to recognize Jesus as God, they are giving themselves an eternal death sentence.

Jesus is trying to say, “I’m not just from the other side of the mountain; I am from God; I am from above” (v. 23).

When you reject Jesus as the great “I AM,” then you have decided on your own eternal death. This is a persistent claim in the Gospel of John. He will say later, “I am the way, the truth, and the life, and no one comes to the Father but through Me” (John 14). He’s already said in John 3, “He who does not believe in Me has been judged already, because he’s not believed in the name of the Son of God.” The only way to God the Father is through God the Son.

He points to His cross – His greatest gift He is going to give them. “When the Son of Man is lifted up....” – meaning when He’s crucified – “then you will know that I am the sacrificed Son of God” (8:28). In this strange way of being lifted up on the cross, God has come to man. He’s made Himself accessible to man. The barrier of sin that separated a holy God from an unholy people has been reconciled in the blood of the Son.

What does God look like? Look to the cross.

How much does God love the world? Look at the cross.

How can I know God? Look at the cross.

Jesus makes an exclusive claim, “Unless you believe that I am He, you will die in your sins.”

We live in a culture, an intellectual environment in which anyone who makes absolute truth claims is belittled. How dare Jesus say He’s the only way to the Father? Other cultures, other times, other places have found other ways to God. Who’s to say their way is not just as legitimate as the claims of the Christ?

In the academic halls and in politically correct conversations, the notion exists that no one should dare assert his belief system above any other. In fact, going a step further, the world’s wisdom would tell us there is no absolute truth. There is nothing that is true for all people, at all places, at all times. I’ll live my life by my truth; you live your life by your truth. That’s the message of the world.

The problem is Christianity is a very exclusive religion. Oh, it’s available to all people of all times and all places. But you can’t change it. What Christianity says is, “I know God, and I know what God is like. I know the truth. I have encountered the truth in the person of Jesus. And if you don’t believe in the truth of Jesus, you will not have eternity with God.” It is a very exclusive claim. Let’s don’t water it down. If you know anything about the gospel of John, that is the claim of Jesus – over and over again.

I want to give you some examples of how people try to deal with, or be rid of, exclusive truth claims of the gospel.

### **I. People just try to hope it way.**

“I hope Jesus isn’t the only way.”

“I hope there are other ways to get to God.”  
“I hope it’s all a hoax,” the world begins to think.

Mark Lilla, who teaches history at Columbia University, wrote a book called *The Stillborn God*. You know who the stillborn God is? It’s the God of liberal mainline Christianity. It was supposed to be the religion of the future, where we would take all doctrine metaphorically and just be tolerant of everyone. Basically Christianity means loving your neighbor, being a good friend, and making the world a better place. Don’t worry about the miracles or crucifixion and resurrection. In his book, the good professor from Columbia University points out that that kind of Christianity has failed and died. It, indeed, has been buried without the hope of a resurrection. And what’s growing is miracle-believing, supernatural, Christ and cross Christianity.

In fact, no less an authority than the *Chronicle of Higher Education* said a few years ago, “The university is about to be influenced by a whole new generation of top academics who will be seeking guidance and inspiration from orthodox religion. Are we ready for it?”

In other words, Christianity has not gone away. Men and women, with the brightest and best minds, who believe that the only way to God is through His crucified and resurrected Son, are graduating from the highest universities. “Get ready,” The *Chronicle* is saying to academia. “There is a whole new brood of believers coming your way.” In fact, the *New York Times Magazine* had an article explaining the perplexity that scientists are experiencing because they cannot figure out why the great majority of the human race still believes in God.

You can’t hope Christianity away. It is here to stay. The message of the crucified and resurrected Savior is the only message that rings true in the hearts and the minds of a believing people.

Someone has said that in the early *Star Trek* episodes with Spock and Kirk that there is no religion on the show, because science fiction writers of the time figured that a couple of hundred years from now nobody is going to have any religion at all – we’ll all be scientists and everything will be objective, no more mystical religious tradition. But by the second round of *Star Trek* they had already introduced religion, because they realized it isn’t going away.

There is a second way people try to respond to the truth claims of the Christ, His claim to be the only way to the Father.

## **II. People try to outlaw it away.**

We’ve seen that fail – how many times? Anybody heard of the Soviet Union or what’s happening in China today? You cannot suppress or control the movement of the followers of Jesus. The more the government says, “No, you can’t worship Him,” the more on fire the followers of Christ become.

Or China, for example. They kicked out all the Western missionaries in 1945 or 1946. They thought, “That will be the end of that awful Western religion.” But now that the missionaries are gone, Christianity is growing like wild fire. One scholar said there are probably more Christians in China than there are in America, and China is going from one percent Christian to about 30-40

percent Christian in the next hundred years. That's going to change the course of history. Kicking out the missionaries and suppressing the message didn't stop the movement of Jesus in China. All it did was make it indigenous. And now they have a Chinese Christianity. It's not just what Americans are pushing on them. And being a Chinese Christianity, it is so powerful that it cannot be stopped.

Persecuting a religion, in the long run, never helps. You cannot outlaw the claims of the Christ.

### **III. You can't explain it away.**

How many scholars, over how many decades, have tried to say you cannot make an absolute truth claim? And they all have failed. Logic itself forbids the negation of exclusive truth. In making the claim that there is no absolute truth, you are asserting an absolute truth. You can't have it both ways.

Explaining away the Christ and His cross leads you, immediately, to a position of self-contradiction.

Taking on those who explain away the cause of Christ, C.S. Lewis writes,

You cannot go on "explaining away" forever: you will find that you have explained explanation itself away. You cannot go on "seeing through" things forever. The whole point of seeing through something is to see something through it. (*Abolition of Man*)

Nietzsche said, "All truth claims are just power grabs." Freud says, "All views of God are really just psychological projections to deal with our guilt and insecurity." Scientists tell us that our images of God are just evolutionary traits, passed down to help us survive.

Alvin Plantinga, once at Notre Dame – a philosopher of the highest level – says that if we believe the evolutionary scientist who tells us that our religion is merely a product of the genetic struggle to survive, then we really cannot trust our own cognitive faculties to tell us what's really out there. Therefore, don't believe what's been passed down to you about God and morality. The philosopher Plantinga asked the evolutionary scientists, "Well then, how can you ever trust what your faculties are telling you about the theory of evolution?" Therefore, if the scientist is right, then he is, by his own definition, wrong.

You get the point. We all have a foundation somewhere. Everyone is making exclusive claims to truth – not just the followers of Jesus.

### **IV. You can't argue it away.**

The idea that all religions are equally right, and, therefore, saying Jesus is the only way is bad or wrong, is absurd. Every religious founder of every other major religion says something like this: "I am a prophet who has come to show you the way to find God." But unlike all the other major religions of the world, Christianity has a founder who says, "I am God, and I have come to find you." That's radically, radically different.

Intellectual pastor Timothy Keller says that he was once on a panel with an imam and a rabbi. They were talking to a group of people at a school of social research in downtown New York. He says, "I really upset them – the students. This is what I said to them: if Jesus is not just a prophet showing us how to find God, but is actually God come to find us, then Christianity would have to be a superior religion. It would have to be a better way of finding God, if it's actually God coming to find us. On the other hand, if what Jesus said is not true, then it would be an inferior religion, it would be a blasphemous religion, and Jesus would be either deranged or a fraud. Christianity is either far better or far worse than any other religion, but it is not the same."

Believe it or not, he said the Muslim cleric and the rabbi absolutely agreed. How could you not agree with that logic?

But the students were very upset. "No, no. You're all equal," they said. And the religious leaders responded, "How dare you violate us? You're not listening to us. It's who we are. You cannot say all religions are equally right."

Either Christianity is way better or way worse. Make up your mind. You can't have it both ways.

Now you might say, with humility, "I don't know which religion is true." But you cannot say no one can know the truth. If so, you're being awfully arrogant and dogmatic in presuming that you have the ultimate view of reality which is greater than any exclusive religion. By the way, that would be the very exclusivity which you would be criticizing, wouldn't it?

One pastor remembers trying to lead a lady to Christ. At one point in the conversation, the lady said to him, "Wait a minute. What are you trying to do to me?"

He responded, quite honestly, "I'm trying to evangelize you."

"You mean you're trying to convert me?"

"Yes."

"You're trying to get me to adopt *your* view of spiritual reality and convert *me*?"

"Yes."

"How narrow! How awful. Nobody should say that their view of spirituality is better than anybody else or try to convert them to it. Oh, no, no, no. Everybody should just leave everybody else alone."

"Wait a minute," said the pastor. "Wait a minute. You want me to adopt your view of spiritual reality? What are you doing to *me*? What you're saying is I have to take on your spiritual reality that all religions are equal. You're saying that I would be better off if I thought about religion like you. You're saying exactly what I'm saying. So when you say 'Don't evangelize anybody,' you're trying to evangelize me into your – [and I'm quoting] – Western, white, enlightenment, individualistic, privatized understanding of religion."

It's not narrow to make an exclusive truth claim. To say there are no exclusive truth claims is, in essence, to make a truth claim.

So what do we do? We are making an exclusive truth claim. I am standing in this pulpit saying, across the air waves, that Jesus is the way, the truth, the life – and no one will ever be with the Father except through Jesus.

How do we go about preaching that message in a new way?

The reality is Jesus didn't come and push His position through strength. He didn't brandish a sword and shout, "Charge," rushing on a horse. He went to a cross and died. He became a servant. He sacrificed. He became weak and paid for the sins of the world on the cross. He was the God who washed our feet.

This means those who hold the truth claim of Christianity don't hate anyone. We don't despise anybody. We don't even feel superior to others. In fact, I am quite certain there are some Hindu fathers who are much better fathers than I. Or a Buddhist neighbor who might be a much better neighbor than I.

But I do have the truth. I am saved by grace – not of myself, and that's the truth.

Christianity used to work that way, you know. Why did Christianity eventually overrun the Roman Empire when it wasn't even trying to gain political power. The Greco-Roman world didn't believe in exclusive truth. They thought everyone had their own god – that's very open, isn't it? No one has the truth, everybody has his or her own God. That's what the Greco-Roman world said. It was full of gods and goddesses. Paul saw that.

But the Christians came along and said, "We have the true God, and He is the only God." It looked like the Christians had the more narrow, intolerant way of viewing the world and the Greco-Romans had the most open, gracious way of viewing the world. But here's the catch: the way they lived testified to the contrary. In the Greco-Roman world, the poor were despised. In the Christian world, the poor were loved. In the Greco-Roman world of many gods and goddesses, the women were looked down on. In the Christian world, the women were empowered. The Greco-Roman world kept races and classes apart. The Christian world brought them all together and commanded that they have a meal called the Lord's Supper. When the plagues came in the second century and people were dying in the cities, and the streets were littered with people abandoned by their loved ones, the Christians stayed. In many cases, the Christians died taking care of their pagan neighbors. In other words, the Christians had the absolute most narrow world, but God is full of ironies. The narrow world view of Christianity leads to the most loving, most inclusive lifestyle. Christians serve even their enemies.

The Greco-Roman world was saying, "We don't know who has the truth. Everybody has their own." But the Christians lived their truth as the most peace-loving, the most generous, the most sacrificial, the most inclusive possible lifestyle – making the most exclusive possible truth claim.

It's okay to be a fundamentalist if your fundamental is a man dying on the cross for His enemies. If it's a man praying for His enemies, loving them. When that sinks down into your heart of hearts as your exclusive truth, that's the kind of truth I think the whole world can both accept and embrace.

“I am the way, the truth, and the life. And no one comes to the Father but through Me.”

“I said therefore to you, that you shall die in your sins, unless you believe that I am He.”