

Mind Matters: Exclusive

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John 14:1-11

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Today we continue our series “Mind Matters,” exploring in this first half of the series some of the intellectual or logical hold ups some might have to the claims of faith. Next Sunday, we’ll continue in the series as we are led in worship and the Word by our youth for Youth Sunday. Then following that, we’ll continue it, but in a different gear, talking about how the gospel might speak into matters of mental health or mental illness.

Today, as we come to the Gospel of John, we come to a matter that for some feels assuring, others confusing, still others troubling, and that is the exclusivity of Jesus. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

[Read passage, John 14:1-11.] The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Gracious God, we thank for this Word, which at once comforts us, assures us of your faithfulness and truth, as it also challenges us in understanding the truth of the gospel. Be with us, by your Spirit, and give us hearts to see your Son, Christ Jesus, the Word of God. And for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

If you were to compile some kind of ranking of all the verses of the Bible based on which ones had caused, whether intended or not, the most psychological or emotional damage, I’m not sure what would come out as number one, but one of the verses we just read would definitely be in the top five. And that’s really a shame.

John 14:6, these words of Jesus spoken to his disciples at the Last Supper, before he was betrayed and crucified. *“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”*

You might be able to guess why such a statement could cause so much damage. You might even have personal experience along these lines. You might have been on the receiving or giving end of some rather hurtful words using this verse as a bludgeon, drawing a line in the sand.

Jesus says, plain and simple, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. *No one* comes to the Father except through me.” If you want to get to God—and depending on how one understands it—if you want to get to heaven, if you want to be saved, you have to go through Jesus. You have to accept him into your heart and believe in him as your Lord and Savior. There is no other way.

Reactions to this verse, this one simple verse, tend to fall into two camps: on one hand, we embrace the clarity of who's in and who's out, maybe even revel in it, and on the other hand, we read it and say, "Nah, that can't be right. Surely no one religion, much less one person, can claim exclusive access to God." And honestly I think what Jesus is really saying here will offer some correctives on both fronts.

On one hand, there's the camp that responds, "Amen! That's right! Christ alone! That's the gospel. Christ is the only way, and everyone else, well, none of them are going to heaven."

There's this old story—who knows if it's even true—where a missionary travels to a remote village to bring the gospel to those who had not heard the message of Jesus. After living with them and learning the language, the missionary shared the gospel, and one of the villagers had a few questions. "So you're saying that because I am sinful, I must believe in this Jesus as my savior so that my sins will be forgiven and I can go to heaven when I die, right?" Missionary says, "That's right." "And if I don't, I will instead go to hell, right?" "That's right. Christ alone is the way, the truth, and the life." "So what about all the past generations? Everyone who died before you came and didn't hear this message, so they never could have believed it. Are they in hell right now?" The missionary answered, "No, God does not hold accountable those who had not heard the gospel before their death." "So let me get this straight. If all our ancestors didn't have to worry about going to hell because they hadn't heard this message, but if now that you've shared it with the whole village, everyone here is now in danger of eternal torment if they don't believe, then why on earth did you come all the way out here and tell us?"

If we come to this verse with the attitude of, "Who gets into heaven and who doesn't," I believe we are missing the point. When Jesus speaks to his disciples here, he is preparing them for a time when they would be without him. And so Jesus gives them these words of comfort, saying, "Do not let your hearts be troubled." He then goes on to describe all the room within his Father's house, in God's house, and he is going to prepare a place for them, and will come back to take them "to himself," as he puts it, and he adds, "And you already know the way." One of the disciples asks "How? We don't know where you're going." Jesus then answers, "I am the way."

When Jesus tells Thomas that he is "the way, the truth, and the life," he is speaking to a man, to a group, despairing the loss of their leader and anxious for their own future. When told that they do indeed know the way, they're confused, at which point Jesus clarifies, "No, no, no, I'm not here to give you directions to tell you the way. *I* am the way. And I am going to prepare a place for you. I am coming back to take you to myself, so that you can be with me and with the Father."

If we take Jesus' words to be merely a line drawn in the sand, we miss their meaning. These are words of comfort to troubled hearts, meant to express Jesus' care for his disciples, that he was going ahead of them and was coming back for them, and they needn't worry about how to get to God, so to speak. So using this verse as a bludgeon to divide us from them and cause anxiety about eternal destinations is in fact a rather twisted use of this verse, because Jesus isn't pointing them down a path and saying, "That way to heaven." He is pointing to himself and saying, "I am the way. Your journey is with me."

Which brings us to the second way many people respond to this verse, that is, that we read it and recoil, thinking God couldn't be so exclusive to one way of belief.

There's a lot that's appealing to that line of thought, honestly. I'm sure some of you have heard the old story about the blind people and the elephant. Different blind persons are touching different sections of the same elephant and describing what they felt. One felt the elephant's trunk and said it was a large snake. One felt the elephant's tusk and said it was a smooth spear. One felt the elephant's leg and said it was a tree trunk. Et cetera. But it was all the same elephant. Surely the world's religions are merely like the blind trying to describe an elephant, all getting at the same God from different angles. No one's wrong or right about God, just different perspectives getting at the same thing.

Some of you might be here today nodding your head to yourself thinking, "Yeah that seems reasonable to me." We don't have time today to go into detail about the mutually exclusive or just incompatible and contradictory claims of the world's various religions, but if you have questions along those lines, let's talk more.

More to the point of this passage, such a view is not an option Jesus leaves open. When he says, "I am the way," he is not saying he is one way among many, but rather *the* way. But Jesus says more than just being a path to God. He claims oneness with God. Verse 7 reads: "If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him." What Jesus is saying here, and as he would clarify in the next few verses, is that if you've seen him, you've seen God.

Now this is an extraordinary claim, and one that is central to the Christian faith: that the one we worship and serve is not a god content to be aloof in the rafters but rather the Lord who walked among us, who died and rose again, who didn't point us on a way to God but rather pointed to himself and said, "I am the way."

A professor in seminary once shared this story. He was taking part in an inter-faith panel with a Jewish rabbi and a Muslim imam. He, as a pastor, began to answer a question about God by talking about Jesus, at which point the moderator stopped him and asked, respectfully, that he

use language of God rather than Jesus for the sake of seeking common ground in inter-faith dialogue. At that point, the Muslim imam then spoke up, reminding the moderator that the pastor, my old professor, was indeed correct. “As a Christian,” the imam pointed out, “his conception of God must begin with Jesus and be inseparably defined by him. If it does not, he is not Christian.”

If you want to see the way to God, look at Jesus. If you want to see the truth of God, look at Jesus. If you want to see the life of God, look at Jesus. These claims about Jesus, if true, are of singular, exclusive, paramount significance in world history. If untrue, it is of no significance whatsoever. But in neither case can one say that Jesus could be one among many ways to God. The very claims of the Christian faith, of Christ alone, do not leave that option open.

But lest we feel ourselves beginning to want to draw lines in the sand again, may we be reminded that these words are meant not to bring despair but to bring comfort. And when we feel tempted to proclaim Jesus as the only way, the truth, and the life, we would perhaps be well-served to remember just what kind of way that is. A way of humility, a way of worship, a way of sacrifice, or giving of yourself, of putting others’ interests before your own, a way of dying to yourself and rising into new life. This is the way of Jesus. This is the way of God. And it is perhaps only when we’ve truly embraced this way of our Lord do we remotely have any business claiming anything exclusive about it.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.