

I. Introduction

- A. Welcome back to our summer series: **What's the Difference?**
- B. In this series, we are asking a question: what is the difference between the gospel we teach here at Pathway (along with millions of churches like us) and the religious systems, spiritual traditions, and worldviews around us?
- C. We are not here to mock anybody. We are not here to act superior. We respect sincere people in every tradition. But truth matters because souls matter. And if Jesus is telling the truth, then we need to understand it in order to step into his love.
- D. My talk today is part six in the series. It is called: **Universalism and Pluralism.**
- E. And I have seven signposts along the road we need to travel.

II. Seven Signposts

A. **1. The ACHE we feel: The idea of final judgment is uncomfortable and sad.**

- 1. Pluralism says many roads lead to God.
- 2. Universalism says everybody gets there in the end.
- 3. Slightly different ideas, but they often blend into one soft cultural slogan: All roads lead to God.
- 4. And I need to confess this up front.
- 5. My Inner Nice Guy wants that to be true.
 - a) No hellfire.
 - b) No final judgment.
 - c) No knots in my stomach over people I love who do not believe in Jesus.
 - d) No hard questions about the sincere Buddhist grandmother, the devout Muslim father, the secular friend who is kinder than half the Christians you know, or the person who never got a decent Christian witness.
 - (1) Just one gigantic, cosmic happily-ever-after.
- 6. Honestly, part of me would prefer to preach that sermon.
- 7. It would be easier.
- 8. And if you are already tightening up because you think this is going to be one of those hellfire sermons, count me out.
- 9. I am sorry if someone ever preached judgment with a bunch of shouting. Or with a smile of superiority. If someone used the fear of hell to scare you, shame you, control you, or keep you spiritually small, that was not the heart of Jesus.
 - a) Jesus wept over lost people. (John 11:35)
 - b) Paul said he would wish himself accursed if it meant his people could be saved. (Romans 9:3)
 - c) Peter said God is not willing that any should perish. (2 Peter 3:9)
 - (1) There are no damnation happy feet in the New Testament.
- 10. A London preacher named R.W. Dale once said D.L. Moody was the only preacher who had the right to preach on hell, because Moody couldn't talk about hell without tears in his eyes.
- 11. That is the spirit I want today.
 - a) Not swagger and not threats.
 - b) I preach with an ache in my heart and tears in my eyes.
- 12. Because if this doctrine is true, it should not make us cocky. It should make us humble. And it should make us want to do all we can to show everyone we know the way to refuge and forgiveness and eternal life with God.
 - a) Which is something I want to do today. So, at the end of my talk today, I'd like to show you how you can receive Jesus for yourself today. It won't be weird, and I won't single you out.
- 13. We cannot solve the ache by pretending human choice does not matter, or that Jesus did not warn us, or that the Cross was unnecessary.

B. **2. The WARNING we can't erase: Hell is an unavoidable teaching of Scripture.**

- 1. Before we go further, I need to make one thing clear.
 - a) Hell is not a medieval invention.
 - b) Hell is not a scare tactic created by angry preachers.
 - (1) Hell is a biblical teaching.
- 2. And if you debate hell, you are not mainly debating me, or this church, or some harsh preacher from your past.
- 3. You are debating Scripture.
- 4. And supremely, you are debating Jesus.
- 5. Listen to the Bible in rapid fire.
 - a) Jesus said: *"Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell."* (Matthew 10:28)
 - b) *"And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."* (Matthew 25:46)
 - c) John the Baptist warned that the Messiah would gather His wheat into the barn: *"But He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."* (Matthew 3:12)
 - d) Paul wrote that those who reject the gospel: *"Shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord."* (2 Thessalonians 1:9)
 - e) And Revelation says: *"Anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire."* (Revelation 20:15)
- 6. That is not one obscure verse.
 - a) That is Moses and the Prophets' world.
 - b) That is John the Baptist, St. Paul, and the Revelation.
 - c) That is Jesus.
- 7. So you may struggle with hell. I struggle with hell.

8. You may ache over it. I ache over it.
9. You may have questions. So do I.
 - a) But what you cannot honestly say is that hell is not in the Bible.
 - b) And you cannot say Jesus did not warn us.
10. So the question is not, Do I like this teaching.
 - a) The question is, Can I trust the Word of God?

C. 3. The WILL we were given: God treats human choice with real dignity.

1. To understand why this matters so much, go back to the beginning.
2. The longer I study the Word of God, the more convinced I become that human free will is one of the most serious powers in the universe.
 - a) *"Then God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion...'"* (Genesis 1:26)
3. That means God did not make puppets. He made living sentient beings and endowed them with some of his own attributes in limited measure.
 - a) God has intelligence, and He gave you intelligence.
 - b) God has love, and He gave you the capacity to love.
 - c) God rules, and He gave you delegated dominion.
4. God was pleased to be in relationship with us, and he made us that way.
5. You were designed to choose, to love, to trust, to rule under God, to say yes to your Creator. Adam and Eve were not decorative animals in a garden. They were vice-regents. They were crowned representatives of God on earth.
6. That is why Scripture keeps speaking the language of choice.
 - a) *"I have set before you life and death... therefore choose life."* (Deuteronomy 30:19)
 - b) *"Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve."* (Joshua 24:15)
7. Your choices mean something. God speaks to your free will because your free will matters.
8. And this is the first place where the teaching called Universalism starts to wobble. It wants a loving God who finally saves everybody, no matter what they choose. But that kind of love quietly erases the very dignity God gave you.
9. **God loves you too much to treat you like a machine.**
10. He will invite. He will warn. He will pursue. He will redeem. He will open the door.
11. But He will not shove you through it.
12. Because love forced is not love. Faith forced is not faith. Heaven forced is not heaven... because an unwanted relationship that you didn't choose will never feel like a blessing.
13. God loves you enough to rescue you and invite you into relationship with him.
14. And He also honors you enough not to force you into that relationship.

D. 4. The BONDAGE we can't break: The force called sin bends human free will into palpable bondage.

1. Genesis is not just the story of forbidden fruit. It is the story of human free will turning against the God who gave it.
2. God gave Adam and Eve a crown for their blessing, but they used it to declare their independence.
 - a) He gave them dominion, and they tried to seize deity.
 - b) He gave them free will, and they aimed it away from Him.
 - (1) That is what sin is.
3. Sin is not merely doing bad things. Sin is the will curved inward. Sin says, My kingdom come. My will be done.
4. And when the human race fell, the will did not disappear.
 - a) It bent.
 - b) It broke.
 - c) It went into bondage.
 - (1) Jesus said "Whoever commits sin is a slave of sin" (John 8:34).
 - (2) Paul says we were "dead in trespasses and sins" (Ephesians 2:1). Romans says we become slaves of the thing we obey.
5. So when I say your will matters, I do not mean your will is naturally healthy, neutral, or able to save itself.
6. It is real. But apart from grace, and because of sin, your free will is shackled and in chains.
7. That is why so many times you do things you don't want to do and don't do things you do want to do.
 - a) *"I want to do what is good, but I don't. I don't want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway... when I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what is wrong."* (Romans 7:19, 21)
8. That is the tragedy... and so many of us have lived it!
9. The infection of Sin does not make us less responsible.
10. It makes us more trapped.
11. It also makes us more guilty.
12. God's Word shows the human condition with heartbreaking clarity.
13. People knew God, but did not glorify Him as God. They did not give thanks. They exchanged His glory for idols. They traded truth for lies.
14. And then three times in Romans chapter 1, St. Paul says the same haunting phrase:
 - a) **God gave them over.**
 - (1) God gave them over to uncleanness (Romans 1:24).
 - (2) God gave them over to dishonorable passions (Romans 1:26).
 - (3) God gave them over to a debased mind (Romans 1:28).

15. That is judgment language.
16. But notice what kind of judgment it is. God is not forcing people into evil they did not want.
 - a) **God hands over people to the life their free will keeps demanding.**
17. In other words: God says, if you insist on a universe without Me, I will not pretend your choice means nothing. If you insist on morality without me, relationships without me, value systems without me, politics without me...
18. You will get what you want. You will reap what you sow.
19. That is why hell is not God throwing a tantrum.
 - a) **Hell is the final tragedy of the human will telling God to Get Lost.**
20. It is you saying, "God, MY will be done," and God taking that refusal with ultimate seriousness.
21. He invites. He warns. He frustrates the godless path. He sends truth, Scripture, witnesses, love — and His own beloved Son.
 - a) But what he will not do is treat your no as if it were a yes.
 - b) Free will matters.
22. And this is why the gospel is such good news.
23. You can say yes to God through Jesus Christ, and you can do that today.
 - a) Jesus did not come to decorate your bondage with religion. He came to break your bondage with a rescue operation.
 - b) Jesus came for weak wills, bent hearts, rebel queens and kings, prodigals, clean cut business leaders, politicians, sinners, and royals who have had their crowns knocked off their heads.
24. People say that if you're climbing to the top of a mountain any road will get you there even if it's hard. That's true.
25. The problem is that with God, salvation is not a climb up a mountain. It can't be. He dwells in infinite grandeur, eternally out of reach.
26. No, salvation is not a climb up a mountain. Salvation is an elevator, and you're either in it or out when the doors finally close.
27. And by the way, if you're still breathing the doors are not closed and you can step on board today.
- E. **5. The TRUTH we can't deny: Pluralism plants absurdity at the core of existence.**
 - a) **Pluralism says basically all religions are equally valid paths to God, salvation, enlightenment, or ultimate reality.**
 2. No single faith has the final word.
 3. Christianity may be meaningful for Christians, Islam for Muslims, Buddhism for Buddhists, Hinduism for Hindus, secular spirituality for secular people.
 4. "They're all saying the same thing anyway." That's the claim.
 - a) Your truth is truth for you and my truth is truth for me.
 5. That's Pluralism: your truth and my truth can contradict each other and both still be true.
 - a) "There are no facts, only interpretations." (Nietzsche)
 - b) "Speak your truth." (Oprah Winfrey, making truth subjective)
 6. The problem is that life, experience, and logic teach the opposite. Every day, people say things that prove that opposite claims cannot both be true in the same way at the same time.
 7. If I say that good pizza is only found 2 blocks south, and you say it's 2 blocks north, we can't both be right — and everybody knows it.
 - a) Jesus cannot be God incarnate and not God incarnate.
 - b) Salvation cannot be by grace through faith in Christ and also by works of law or karma by effort.
 - c) Religions are not all the same. In fact religions say very opposite things. They can't all be true.
 8. In logic and philosophy, this is called **The Principle of Non-Contradiction**.
 9. A thing cannot both be and not be in the same way at the same time.
 10. It's common sense, and it's deep philosophy from Aristotle on down. But people still deny it, which is why the Persian philosopher Avicenna (980–1037) said:
 - a) "Anyone who denies the law of non-contradiction should be beaten and burned until he admits that to be beaten is not the same as not to be beaten, and to be burned is not the same as not to be burned."
 11. **To say that opposites can both be true is to introduce absurdity into the core of existence.**
 12. Pluralism claims to honor all religions, but it doesn't.
 13. It actually edits all religions.
 14. It files down the sharp edges. It sacrifices truth on the altar of inoffensive niceness. It throws everything into the same blender, whips up a smoothie, and says, have a drink.
 15. No. These things don't go together.
 16. But Jesus did not leave us that option.
 - a) He said: *"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me."* (John 14:6)
 - b) Peter preached: *"Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."* (Acts 4:12)
 - c) Paul wrote: *"For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself a ransom for all..."* (1 Timothy 2:5–6)
 17. That is not religious flattening. That is particular, personal, blood-bought salvation through Jesus Christ.
 18. Pluralism edits all of that out — blending every faith into one smoothie of contradictions and hoping nobody notices.
- F. **6. The FRACTURE we didn't see: Universalism breaks the seriousness of human freedom.**
 1. Universalism says, in the end, everyone is saved. But Scripture keeps showing us a God who invites, pleads, warns, and grieves over real human refusal to be saved.

2. Jesus cried over Jerusalem and said:
 - a) *"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!"* (Matthew 23:37)
3. Hear those words: I wanted. You were not willing.
4. That is not a small sentence. That is Jesus putting divine desire and free human refusal in the same verse.
 - a) He says again: *"But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life."* (John 5:40)
5. Not unable to find a road. Not lacking a spiritual option. Not waiting for all paths to merge.
6. Not willing to come to Me.
7. C. S. Lewis captured this biblical pattern when he said there are two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, Thy will be done, and those to whom God finally says, Thy will be done.
8. God will not finally treat your no as if it were a yes.
 - a) Universalism tries to protect God's love, but all it can do is make human choice unreal.
9. The problem is that any love that erases your free will is not love. It is possession.
10. The gospel says the Savior has come, the ransom has been paid, the door is open, and the summons is real, and now your choice is in play.
 - a) *"And the Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!' And let him who hears say, 'Come!' And let him who thirsts come. Whoever wills, let him take the water of life freely."* (Revelation 22:17)
11. Whoever wills may come.
12. That's the invitation today. Come. Come. Not to a religion but to a person. Come to Jesus.
13. One person at a time. Come to him. Are you willing to be a "one person" today?

G. 7. The GRACE we could never climb to: True grace is the exclusive treasure of Christianity.

1. Philip Yancey tells a story about a scholarly conference on comparative religion. Experts were arguing what, if anything, made Christianity unique.
2. Incarnation? Other religions had gods appearing in human form.
3. Resurrection? Other traditions had returns from death.
4. Then C.S. Lewis wandered in late, heard the question, and answered without hesitation: "Oh, that's easy. It's grace."
5. After more debate, the room agreed.
6. Grace is Christianity's exclusive treasure.
7. And that is exactly why pluralism and universalism cannot swallow the gospel without killing it.
8. Pluralism says many roads climb the same mountain.
9. Universalism says, one way or another, almost everybody finally arrives.
10. Both negate grace. Both keep you climbing — by sincerity, spirituality, moral effort, or cultural devotion. They still ask the old religious question: How does a human being get up to God?
 - a) **Of all the systems ever devised, only Christianity reverses the direction.**
11. Every other system, at its core, is ascent. Karma. Ritual. Obedience. Enlightenment. Being "a good person." Climb higher. Become worthier. Work the path.
12. Grace is God's descent.
13. God does not stand at the summit grading climbers. In Jesus Christ, God comes down the mountain. Incarnation. Cross. Resurrection. Unmerited. Costly. Complete. Directed even toward enemies. Not a boost for the sincere. A rescue for the ruined.
14. That is why "all roads" thinking dies at Calvary.
 - a) If every sincere trail already works, the Cross is decorative.
 - b) If everybody ends safe whether or not they have the Son, Jesus becomes inspirational theater instead of Mediator.
15. But if grace is what Lewis said it is — the thing no other religion can truly offer — then exclusivity is not arrogance. It is announcement.
 - a) Not: climb better than other religions.
 - b) But: you cannot climb at all — so God came down.
16. Religion says become worthy, then come.
17. Grace says Christ came for the unworthy, and the door is open.
18. The difference is not climbing hard.
19. The difference is letting a Savior carry you where you could never climb.
20. The difference is grace.

III. Invitation

- A. C.S. Lewis said the doors of hell are locked from the inside. That line captures something biblical. God will not finally treat your no as if it were a yes.
- B. Jesus says: *"Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."* (Matthew 11:28)
- C. Would you like to pray right now to receive Jesus?
 1. ADMIT: God, I admit I need You. I have sinned, and I cannot save myself.
 2. BELIEVE: I believe Jesus died on the cross for my sins and rose again to give me life.
 3. CHOOSE: Right now, I choose to trust Jesus as my only Savior. I receive Him by faith. Save me because of Him.
- D. In Jesus' name, amen.
- E. If you prayed that, God heard you.
- F. Welcome to the family of God.