

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(February 22, 2009)

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Show Stoppers

Mere Christianity (to steal a phrase)

(John 14:6; Ephesians 2:8-9; 1 John 5:13)

Study #7

Introduction: The heart of the matter...

One of the very first books I read as a young Christian was C. S. Lewis' (now classic) Mere Christianity. After seventeen years of attending a church to little effect, reading this little book was like shining a light into a place that had never before seen the light of day.

Revealed by Mere Christianity were the most basic truths of the faith I had recently embraced. As a teenager, my faith grew as I read that little paperback.

In Mere Christianity, C. S. Lewis never detours into the rough. He stays on the fairway of what is essential to the Christian faith. He tackles the existence of God, human nature, the Trinity, the work of Christ, the basis for morality and some other core items.

If you have never read Mere Christianity, I hope you will - and soon! I was thumbing through an old copy of the book this week and I found that it has improved with age. There are timely books, written for a season, and then there are timeless books. Mere Christianity is timeless.

C. S. Lewis was a literary giant. Another literary giant once said, "*A man's got to know his limitations.*"¹ - and I'm well aware that my own limitations place me well below the standard set by C.S. Lewis in Mere Christianity!

¹ Detective Harry (Dirty Harry) Callaghan, in Magnum Force, literary force, Clint Eastwood.

But, as Lewis wrote about Christianity's essentials in his book, I'm aiming to speak to the essentials of the faith this morning. Hence, the pretentious title for the sermon: "Mere Christianity."

For the next few minutes, we'll focus on what is essential; we'll look at "first things."

And today I want to say three things about "mere Christianity." The first thing I want to say is this: Christianity is all about Jesus.

Mere Christianity is All About Jesus **(He is the only way)**

The Many Claims to be the ONLY Way

Many people claim Christianity is broad

There is a growing opinion among many people today that Christianity is a very broad religion and that Jesus is mainly concerned with the sincerity of a person's beliefs, whatever those beliefs may be.²

Further, the idea has gained traction that since Christianity is simply one of a number of religious options available today, it doesn't much matter which religion one either chooses or concocts for him or herself, cafeteria-style.

Lots of people believe that no religion or spiritual perspective is better or worse than any other; that there is no real difference between religions; that one is as good as another; that the only thing that matters is that we are sincere.³

The sense among some people is that there are a few technical distinctions between religions, but that, essentially, all religions are saying the same thing.

² We'll consider that idea in a moment...

³ The assumption is that because these people are sincere, they can't be wrong. However, sincerity, or lack of it has nothing to do with truth! We can be sincerely right or sincerely wrong. People who followed Jim Jones to Guyana in the 70's were sincere, but wrong. Truth must be determined by measures other than sincerity.

These are significant opinions.

If the people who hold them are correct then there are certain huge implications for what we are doing here at church. If they are wrong, the implications are even more critical, both for us and for those outside.

And, to be sure, there are many, many, many people who are outside the fold of Christianity today.

*Many people are **NOT** Christians*

% of Christians, worldwide

Today, of the estimated 6.76 billion souls on planet earth, there are 1.5 billion Muslims, 900 million Hindus, 376 million Buddhists, hundreds of millions of Muslims, and a few million Jews.

There are millions more atheists, secularists, and modern deists roaming the streets of our cities along with tribal animists roaming jungles.

The website www.adherents.com tells us that there are 2.1 billion Christians. That's certainly a lot of people.⁴ Nominal (= in name) Christianity is the single largest religious preference in the world today. But that number also indicates that there are a few billion people who would beg to differ.

And surely it is important that we show tolerance to the 75%+ part of the world's population who believe differently than we do.

The importance of tolerance

It is important that we tolerate other people's views. It is not just American, it is right that each person should be free to hold whatever opinion they wish to hold on religious topics (as long as those opinions don't harm someone else). Christians and others need to be tolerant of people with different opinions.⁵

⁴ Hardly anyone would suspect that all of these are true believers in Jesus Christ.

⁵ Tolerance is a virtue, yes. But... A position can be narrow and wrong OR narrow and right. Truth is always intolerant of error. Pilots must narrowly land their airplanes on the runway. Auto makers narrowly design cars to run on gasoline.

But tolerance doesn't mean that we can't have serious conversation about different ideas and opinions. And it is important to note that the major religions I've listed are not "mostly" alike, not mostly saying the same things, AND not mostly in agreement about the major things.

No, they are vastly different from one another and from Christianity. Consider...

Many religions, one main idea, right?

God

When it comes to beliefs about God, Christianity is Trinitarian. Moslems and Jews are strong Unitarians, and believe that Christians are wrong for their trinitarian belief system.

Hindus are, strictly speaking, pantheists, whose god is an eternal, non-personal, abstract force (called Brahman). But Hindus also believe in the existence of thousands of lesser "gods and goddesses."

Buddhism holds to a variety of concepts about God including pantheism, polytheism and atheism.

On the theme of God, the world's religions could not be more different. And then, when it comes to the eternal destiny of their adherents, the major religions of the world are also not on the same page.

The destiny of people

Christians believe they will spend eternity in heaven with God.

Jews land at various points on a broad spectrum of beliefs about the afterlife. Some say that nothing exists after this life. Others believe in a heaven where they will enjoy a relationship with their Messiah.

Muslims believe that they will join Allah in heaven for an eternity of sensual pleasure.

Hindus believe they eventually will end up becoming one with the impersonal supreme being in a state of Nirvana, and that the individual ceases to have his own personal identity.

Buddhists aspire to a state of total nothingness, a final annihilation of individual consciousness.

Then, to pick a third category, consider the major religions' beliefs about salvation.

Salvation

Christianity teaches that a person goes to Heaven by his acceptance of Christ's payment on the cross for his sin.

The Jew believes he gains salvation by leading a moral life and turning to God.

The Muslim tries to earn his own salvation by performing the duties of the Five Pillars of Faith.

The Hindu believes that he achieves his desired state of oneness with Brahman through a series of reincarnations.⁶

The Buddhist believes he earns his own release from the endless chain of reincarnations by following the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path.

So, are all religions basically/essentially the same? Not hardly!

They differ in their ideas of who God is, in their view of ultimate human destiny, in their means of attaining salvation and so much more.

Each major world religion is dramatically from the others. They are not all different ways leading to the same mountain top. They are paths on different mountains!

And what is striking beyond a consideration of these religions' differences is that they are all narrow. They all claim to be correct in their teachings.

Some may say that Hindus will allow for an openness to all faiths, that Hinduism teaches that all religions are just different paths up the same mountain to find God. But most Hindus would not happily allow their children to be brought up as Christians!

And make no mistake about it. Christianity is extremely narrow, too. Where did that narrowness come from? Is it from judgmental Christians. No, this narrowness comes from the most loving Person to ever walk the planet, the founder of the faith Himself, Jesus!

Jesus' Claims to be the ONLY Way

What Jesus said about Himself

Listen to some of the claims of Jesus, straight from the Bible.

- ***[John 3:18] He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.***
- ***[John 8:24] 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.***
- ***[John 14:6] Jesus said to Him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me."***

According to Jesus, if a person doesn't take Him seriously and doesn't place their faith in Him, they are eternally lost.

This idea that people are eternally lost without Christ originated, not with the church, but with Jesus!

But others also understood that the faith that bears His Name is exclusively centered on Him.

What others understood and taught

The Apostle Peter preached a sermon early in the Christian era that contained this comment, ***[Acts 4:12] - And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved.***

⁶ The law of Karma says that a Hindu reaps in the next life the rewards or punishments of the present life.

And the Apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome, [*Romans 6:23*] *For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Everybody - even Jesus' enemies - recognized that He claimed to be central to life with God. Christianity says that life, God, Heaven and Hell, meaning, purpose - it's all about Jesus.

This is a very narrow and restrictive position! There is no question but that Christianity is narrow - it is. The only question is whether or not it is true.

Validating Jesus' Truth Claims

The evidence for the resurrection

If Christianity is narrow, how do we determine if it, as opposed to all the other religions of the world, is the true one?

Well, for my money, an examination of the life and teachings of Jesus place Him head and shoulders above the other wise men of history. Add on top of that the miracles He performed and you have clear evidence that He was "bigger than life."

But the final straw that breaks the backs of the other religions is the weighty evidence for the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.⁷

All the evidence points to Jesus having defeated death - something that nobody else has ever done. And if He did THAT, then, His claims to be the unique way to God and to Heaven ring absolutely true!

This resurrected Jesus stands as the crux of history. Given His claims and the weight of His credibility, He demands that we each reach a verdict in our own minds as to who He is.

⁷ See the church website for a message in this series titled "Does God Intervene?" where I deal at length with the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus.

Liar, lunatic, or Lord

He claimed to be God in the flesh. If He was not, then He was either a liar or a lunatic.

But His character argues against Him being a liar and the consistency of His life and testimony argues against Him being a lunatic!

If Christ was neither a liar nor a lunatic, then He is who He claimed to be: the Lord! And if He is Lord - God in the flesh - then Christianity is true and all the other religions in the world fall short.

Summary:

Billions of sincere worshippers alive today are not Christians. But in examining their truth claims, all submit to the irrefutable Law of non-Contradiction, which says:

If A and B contradict each other, then either

- A is true and B is false, or
- A is false and B is true, or
- A is false and B is false, but
- A and B cannot both be true.

Jesus and other ways to reach heaven cannot both be true. Jesus is either right or wrong. He is either the way, the truth, and the life, or He is not.

And this morning we delightedly profess our belief that salvation is found in Jesus - and nowhere else.

There has never been anyone like Jesus. He loved like no one else, taught like no one else, performed miracles like no one else and made claims for Himself that no one else has ever made. We hang all of our hopes on Him and Him alone!

So, the first thing I have wanted to say today is that "mere Christianity" is all about Jesus. I've said that. Now, on to the second thing.

The second thing I want to affirm is this: Mere Christianity is all about God's amazing grace.

Mere Christianity is All About Grace
(works don't cut it!)

No Free Lunches - the Audacity of GRACE!

Just because something is free to me doesn't mean it is free

Here is one of the objections to Christianity I have heard repeatedly in conversations with sincere, well-meaning people. They will frequently tell me,

"It is unreasonable to accept the idea that eternal salvation, forgiveness of sins, becoming a child of God, is free. It must cost us something. Christianity seems WAY too easy. After all, there's no such thing as a free lunch."

I appreciate the concern. I really do. To receive the incredible blessings from God we do when we become Christians as freely given gifts reminds us of one of those "too good to be true" stories.

There is something within each of us that feels the need to somehow contribute to our salvation. But when it comes to gaining salvation, well - what could we contribute?

To illustrate, imagine that someone came up to me and told me, "Dave, you really need to get you a Leer Jet."

I'd assume they were joking, of course. Those things cost millions of dollars, stripped (with no interior!). I couldn't afford a down payment on the interest on a loan for one of those things - and no bank would loan me a dime to buy one, anyway.

But, imagine that the "someone" who told me I should get a Leer Jet was Bill Gates, that Gates called me up and explained,

"Dave, the Jet is already bought and paid for, waiting for you at the airport. I've even put enough money in a fund to buy all the fuel and supplies and support and maintenance you'll ever need. I like to do this for people every once in a while. I've got all the paperwork necessary for you to sign. Just think it over and get back to me if you're interested."

Bill Gates could give me that kind of a gift if he wanted to. And when it comes to me getting a Leer Jet, it is either completely impossible, or it comes to me by way of a gift. That's what the Bible says about any of us gaining eternal salvation.

The point is not that getting to heaven by means of a gift is too easy. The point is that earning our way into Heaven is absolutely impossible!

The Bible clearly teaches that salvation is a free gift of God's grace.

So, with Jesus' "free" gift of salvation.

The Apostle Paul put it this bluntly, ***[Ephesians 2:8]...by GRACE you have been saved***

The salvation Jesus offers is free to us. But just because it is free to us, doesn't mean that it was "free." Every birthday or Christmas gift you and I have ever freely received cost the one who gave us the gift.

Think of what our free salvation cost God the Father. It cost Him the price of sending His own Son to suffer unimaginably for us.

Think of what our free salvation cost the Son of God. It cost Him the enjoyment of Heaven, rejection by people, horrible torture and death.

Nothing of genuine value is ever free. BUT, a gift could be of great value and free TO US if it was paid for by somebody else. And that is what the Bible says is the case when it comes to our being forgiven and receiving eternal life.

We all stand condemned before a just and holy God. We simply can't get to Heaven based on our works. It has to be a gift - or we'll never get there.

But some will object. "OK. I'll accept the idea that I can't earn my way to Heaven all on my own. But surely I have to add something of effort, intention, or good works to get me there. Maybe it is a gift + works?"

The Impossibility of a “works” Salvation

The Bible says works can play no part

Well, the Bible actually deals with that one, too. In Romans 4, the Apostle Paul responded to the idea that we could have any part at all in our salvation. Listen to what he has to say.

[Romans 4:1] What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? [2] For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. [3] For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” [4] Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. [5] But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness

The system God has established for people like you and me to spend eternity with Him in Heaven is a system based on grace. A free gift. No works on our part will ever play any role in salvation.

The insulting nature of works + grace

Imagine that it’s the summer time. Your family and my family have gone to Canyon Lake to enjoy a day at the lake and to have a picnic.

Now imagine that you have an only son and I have an only son. While we’re fixing hamburgers on the grill, the boys decide to go swimming in the lake.

For the purposes of this illustration, your son is a strong swimmer while mine is a weak swimmer. Well, my son goes out too far in the lake for his own good and gets into trouble. Your son (the strong swimmer) decides to rescue our son, who has gone down for the third time!

Well, your son does save my son, but at the expense of his own life. Saving my son totally exhausted him and he slipped below the surface. After a brief and frantic search, your son’s body is found, but all attempts to resuscitate him fail.

Now imagine that I come up to you and say, “*Man, I really want to thank you for your son’s sacrifice for my son. That means so much to me. And I’d like to pay you something for your son’s life. Here.*”

And with that, I shove a \$20 bill into your hand! You’d probably want to hit me in the face! Wouldn’t that be the most insulting gesture you could imagine?

Well, the Bible teaches that any attempt to add to or contribute to the saving work of Jesus is equally insulting to God. No works necessary. No works accepted.

But this whole theme of grace invites yet one more question. Are you ready for it? Some of you may have been anticipating it.

If it is true that salvation is a gift, since there’s no way we could ever earn it AND if it is also true that we can’t even contribute to the gift without insulting God’s great sacrifice of His Son, how do you “keep the troops in line?”

The Power of Grace

Worries about grace...

Doesn’t it seem that this whole message of grace actually promotes bad behavior? Given that our behavior - good or bad - has nothing to do with receiving salvation, isn’t God just handing out a license to steal and removing all incentive for right living?

Well, let’s review one more time the Bible’s teaching that salvation is a gift.

Salvation is a gift, plain and simple

Scripture

[Romans 3:21] But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, [22] even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; [23] for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

[24] BEING JUSTIFIED AS A GIFT BY HIS GRACE THROUGH THE REDEMPTION WHICH IS IN CHRIST JESUS

[Ephesians 2:8] For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, IT IS THE GIFT OF GOD; [9] not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.

[Titus 3:4] But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared, [5] He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, [6] whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, [7] SO THAT BEING JUSTIFIED BY HIS GRACE we would be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

Salvation is clearly a gift, and the nature of a gift is that it is free - no strings attached.

The nature of a gift - no strings attached

Suppose that one day I won the Texas lottery. Shortly after, I decided to have a brand new Corvette delivered to your house, wrapped in a big bow. You'd probably think that was pretty fantastic!

But what if, from that day forward, on the first of every month, you received a bill in the mail for \$536 from GMAC? You would conclude that I had not given you a gift. I gave you a loan!

In the same way, if there are conditions connected to God's offer of eternal life (payments to be made), it is not a gift. But what He gives us is, without question, a free gift of grace.

But the fact that what He gives us is a free gift shouldn't prompt us to be afraid of grace. A message of grace and unconditional love and acceptance with no-strings attached actually promotes good behavior!

Grace actually promotes good behavior!

We parents seek to offer unconditional love to our children, convinced that this will achieve the desired result of well-adjusted, responsible, productive citizens.

And if security is good between parents and children, why would it be so dangerous between us and God?

The reality is that when any of us truly "get" the greatness of God's salvation and the riches of His mercy, we will seek ways to express our gratitude to Him, part of which involves living the way He wants us to live.

So, "mere Christianity" is all about Jesus and it is all about grace. The last thing I want to say this morning is that mere Christianity is all about faith.

Mere Christianity is All About Faith (and what does "believe" mean?)

Biblical Clarity on Faith's Centrality

If anything is clear from the New Testament, it is that salvation is by faith alone in Christ alone. Nearly two hundred times in the New Testament we are told that the only condition for receiving eternal life is "believe." Among those verses are these:

- ***[John 1:12] But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who BELIEVE in His name***
- ***[John 3:18] He who BELIEVES in Him is not judged; he who does not BELIEVE has been judged already, because he has not BELIEVED in the name of the only begotten Son of God.***
- ***[John 8:24] "Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; for unless you BELIEVE that I am He, you will die in your sins."***
- ***[John 20:31] but these have been written so that you may BELIEVE that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that BELIEVING you may have life in His name.***
- ***[Acts 16:31] They said, "BELIEVE in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household."***
- ***[Romans 1:17] For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from FAITH to FAITH; as it is written, "But the righteous man shall live by FAITH."***
- ***[Romans 5:1-2] Therefore, having been justified by FAITH, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, [2] through whom also we have obtained our introduction by FAITH into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God.***

- *[Galatians 2:16] nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through FAITH in Christ Jesus, even we have BELIEVED in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified.*
- *[Galatians 3:22] But the Scripture has shut up everyone under sin, so that the promise by FAITH in Jesus Christ might be given to those who BELIEVE.*
- *[Ephesians 2:8] For by grace you have been saved through FAITH; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God*
- *[1 John 5:13] These things I have written to you who BELIEVE in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.*

One time, some people came to Jesus with a question. They asked, *[John 6:28]...“What shall we do, so that we may work the works of God?”*

Jesus’ answer? *[29]...“This is the work of God, that you BELIEVE in Him whom He has sent.”*

Jesus and every New Testament author consistently tell us that our part is to only to believe.

According to the Bible, we have eternal life based solely on whether or not we have the Son. And we have the Son based solely on whether or not we “believe.”

But what, exactly, do we mean when we say “believe”?

What do we mean by Believe/Faith/Trust?

Not opposed to reason

First, let me speak to the skeptic who thinks that “faith” is when you believe something you know to be false. No! Biblical faith is not about a leap into the dark of ignorance.

Biblical faith assumes discernment and thoughtfulness. The kind of faith the Bible calls us to is a faith informed by evidence.

But, biblical faith is not solely about correct thinking. It is correct thinking PLUS. And Christians from the past give us some help as we look at faith, today.

They tell us that there are different levels of belief, linked to three Latin words: *noticia, assentia, fiducia*.

First, there is *noticia*.

Help from the past

Noticia (notice)

This is the stage at which you, me or anyone else simply notices the facts of the Christian Gospel. We notice the claim that Jesus died on the cross. We notice the claim that Jesus rose from the dead. This is awareness.

But this does not rise to the level of biblical faith. We move closer to that standard when we come to the second word - *assentia*.

Assentia (assent)

This is the stage at which a person acknowledges the truth of the Gospel facts. Jesus died to forgive me of my sins. Jesus truly rose from the dead to grant me life

Assent to the truth claims of Christianity is a good thing, certainly. But there are plenty of people who will give assent to the basic facts of the Gospel but who do not “believe” as the Bible calls them to believe.

The kind of faith to which the Bible calls us is more than a mental assent. What is required is contained in the word *fiducia*.

Fiducia (faith)

This is the point at which we personally place our trust in Christ - who He is and what He has done - to save us.

This isn’t necessarily the point at which a person gets all emotional or tingly.

But it is the point at which someone who is admitting their own sinfulness, acknowledges that by Jesus' death on the cross He paid the penalty that they should have had to pay for their sin. And it is the point at which this person - by an act of the will - receives the free gift of grace and forgiveness God offers.

That's faith. That's what it means to believe. It is to turn from whatever we were trusting - self, good works, church attendance, baptism, tithing, etc... - and to place all trust in Jesus for salvation.

Now, at the moment of turning to Christ, is that faith immediately mature? Does faith eliminate doubts? Are we automatically fully convinced of every bit of Christian doctrine and every Bible fact the instant we exercise our will and trust Jesus? Not necessarily.

The Essence of Faith

Faith and doubt

Faith will lead a person to board a plane, even if he/she has doubts about that plane's making it to the destination.

The doubter evaluates the evidence (most planes don't crash) and boards the plane, in faith, despite doubt. The faith is placed in a trustworthy object and the doubt-racked passenger's faith is rewarded by a safe arrival.

So, the doubt plagued person who places faith in Jesus will find himself forgiven, herself in a relationship with God, and will eventually arrive safe and sound in Heaven because they have placed their faith in a perfect object (Jesus!) - not because they had perfect faith.

Finally, does faith - real, genuine, biblical faith - necessarily imply that we will be spiritual giants from the get-go? Again, I don't think so.

Faith and commitment

Coming to Christ involves receiving a free gift of grace. It is all about receiving what God has to offer us. After all, we have nothing to offer Him but our complete and total need!

Following our decision to take His free gift, we then get to begin the exciting journey of Christian growth and discipleship as we fully commit to the Lordship of Christ over every arena of our lives.

But commitment to Christ is something that matures over time. It takes a lifetime to fully discover what it means to live out the implications Jesus' Lordship.

Yes, biblical belief is a *commitment* kind of belief. But it is NOT a commitment to what we are going to do for God in the future. It is a commitment to trust in what God has already done for us in the past (and will do for us in the future!).

Conclusion:

Christianity: It is all about Jesus. It is all about God's amazing grace. It is all about trust, start to finish.

And if you have already received the free gift of eternal life by trusting Jesus, go from this place rejoicing in what the Lord has done for you and tell your friends the wonderful Good News!

If you have **NOT** already received the free gift, you can tell God today that you want to receive that precious gift of His salvation.

- Tell Him that you understand the problem - that you have sinned and that you stand in need of forgiveness.
- Tell Him how grateful you are for sending Jesus to die on the cross to pay the penalty for your sin.
- Then, simply and earnestly, tell God that you accept Jesus and the gift He offers, that you are trusting Jesus.

The moment you turn to God in faith, you become His son or daughter! My prayer is that you will trust Him - today!