

GRACE'S REIGN

ROMANS 5:12-21; JOHN 15:5-7

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

BY: RYAN DUECK

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I want to begin by thanking Ruth Bergen Braun for preaching last Sunday's sermon. It was a difficult topic but she handled it very well. As she said in her sermon last Sunday, I am grateful that LMC can be a place where we talk about hard things, even in worship.

I also want to put our faith questions road map up again, for those who are new to this sermon series. You'll get a sense of where we're going and where we've already been. If you've missed a previous Sunday, past sermons are always available on our church's website (thanks to Peter for doing this each week!).

So, this week's faith question: **What is God's response to those who aren't Christians?**

Is salvation possible outside of Christianity? Are all those who don't choose to follow Jesus destined for an eternity separated from God? Is there truth and goodness to be found in other religions?

As is the case with most of the questions thus far, it's hard to know where to start and what to cover in a relatively short sermon!

I sat down this week and began by digging around in my systematic theology textbooks from graduate school. What do they say about the scope of salvation, about the various views that Christians have toward people of other religions or no religion at all?

This led to some interesting insights, some of which I will share this morning.

But I think that very early on in my hunting around in theology textbooks for answers to an abstract question, God stopped me and reminded me of something pretty basic and pretty important.

This question, like every faith question in our series, affects us on a personal level.

The reality of pluralism, by which I simply mean the existence of multiple religions, ethnicities, beliefs and practices in the same place, is a challenge to holding a particular faith.

At other points in history, it was possible to live your entire life in a context where most people pretty much believed the same things you did, where you didn't spend much, if *any* time agonizing about the eternal status of those who had a different worldview than you for the simple reason that you rarely encountered such a creature!

With the rise of global communication and air travel and mass movement of people around the globe, it is now the norm that most people come into regular contact with difference. It is just part of our daily lives—our kids go to school with Sikhs and Muslims and atheists. We work with Hindus and indifferent secularists. And, of course, we worship with fellow Christians who understand their faith differently than us.

I'm not suggesting that we are the first Christians to experience this. At many points in Christian history, people have come into contact with other religions. The early church grew in the Roman Empire, which had all kinds of different beliefs!

But I do think that our situation is unique if only because of the availability of information we have at our fingertips—anyone can go home this afternoon and watch a sermon or a lecture from any major religion in the privacy of their own homes!—and the multicultural, multi-ethnic, religiously plural context that we live in.

And the lived experience of pluralism can have a destabilizing effect upon people of all faiths.

We realize the role that our socialization plays in the views that we hold. People tend to embrace the views that are common in the families and countries in which we are raised.

Yes, conversions happen. People do change their minds.

But overall, this is a difficult context within which to make exclusive truth claims—to say that our view is true and others are not.

This question is personal on another level as well. Nearly all of us have people who are dear to us who do not profess faith in Christ or who have left the church—parents, children, siblings, friends, spouses. For some of us, this is a source of deep sadness and anxiety.

And we wonder. What is their fate?

So, very early on in my sermon preparation, I think God brought me back to the basic truth that our response to questions like this is not about solving an intellectual puzzle.

What we have to say about this question affects real relationships. What we have to say about this question gets at the heart of how we hold our faith and whether we can do so in coherent ways.

And ultimately, it gets to the biggest questions of all. What is God like? Can God be trusted?

Well, what can we say?

Broadly speaking there are three ways in which Christians have historically answered the question of the ultimate destiny of those who do not profess Christian faith.

(In what follows, I'm leaning on CMU professor Karl Koop's helpful summary in a recent issue of *Vision* magazine.)

1. Exclusivism

This has perhaps been the most widely held view throughout Christian history. This position says that only those who hear the gospel proclaimed and explicitly confess Christ as their Saviour will be saved. Salvation is only available to Christians.

The positives of this view is that it seems to fit with the broad impetus of the New Testament witness. Jesus is described as being the Saviour of the whole world and he commissions his disciples to go into all nations and make disciples.

It makes sense of passages like Romans 10:13-14:

Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?

The downside of exclusivism is that it leaves big questions about those who never hear the good news of Jesus. Or those who hear very poor and inadequate versions of it. Or those who have been the victims of colonial expressions of mission. Or those who existed long before Jesus arrived on the scene?

Would God really just withhold salvation from those who didn't believe in Jesus for these reasons?

Exclusivism preserves a strong emphasis upon the truth of Christ, his claim to our exclusive allegiance, and the imperative to share this good news with all, but sometimes it seems like at the cost of viewing God as genuinely loving.

Is it loving to withhold salvation from those who haven't heard about Jesus? Is it loving to make people's eternal destiny hinge upon the abilities of fragile, fallen human beings to transmit the message properly?

Earlier, we heard this verse read aloud: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). Dallas Willard has this to say about how we interpret this statement:

It is absolutely crucial that we understand the statement correctly, for it has become the central bone of contention with reference to Christian pluralism or exclusivism. Clearly, according to it, Christ is exclusive. But is Christianity?

If you take the statement to be saying that no one can “come to the Father” (be accepted by God) without specific knowledge of the historical personage Jesus—as many people do take it—then of course billions of people, before, during, and after his time on earth are eliminated from all possibility of “coming to the

Father” simply by accidents of time and place and over which they have no control... This is surely impossible in a world of which John 3:16 is true.

2. Pluralism

At the other end of the spectrum is pluralism. This view has emerged primarily in the modern period, even though traces of it exist throughout history.

Those holding this view would say that all religions are equally valid, that Christ is but one revelation of God among many. Different religions show up in different places at different times in history as people reflect upon the nature of the world and seek to order their lives wisely.

This is an attractive view, on some levels. We don't like to think other people are wrong or that their souls are in peril. We are aware of our own limitations and we recognize that we don't know everything. We know that some people hold the “right” beliefs and behave terribly while others hold the “wrong” beliefs yet seem to live admirable and thoroughly moral lives.

We see all of this and we wonder, “Well, maybe we're all just kind of right in our own way.”

Yet in my view, pluralism quickly collapses into incoherence.

For starters, different religions say different things—about God, about the world, about human beings, about the nature and possibility of salvation. Some flat out contradict each other.

Christianity says that Jesus Christ is God incarnate. Muslims say he was a prophet, but no more. Hindus have multiple deities, Jews have one. Buddhists say that the goal of human existence is the achievement of nirvana and the extinguishing of desire. Christians believe that our truest desires were meant for consummation.

And of course, atheists and agnostics would say that all of the above (and more) is either fantasy or wish projection or so many coping mechanisms to get us through the day.

It probably shouldn't require pointing out, but it does in our day and age where we treat religious beliefs as something like a smorgasbord where we can just sample a bit from here and there and craft our own personal ideology: **These cannot all be true.**

Yes, there is overlap here and there. Yes, different religions have similar moral visions in various places. But these views of the world have real differences and make contradictory claims about the world.

Additionally, this view of the world seems to make too little of human choice. If it doesn't really matter what you believe or how you live because all roads lead to the same destination, it seems to reduce our most deeply held beliefs to little more than expressions of personal preference.

3. Inclusivism

Inclusivists are similar to exclusivists in that they believe that Jesus Christ is the one source of salvation. But they would say that Christ can and does operate outside the boundaries of Christianity.

On this view, we should expect to see traces of truth pretty much everywhere because God has planted a desire for himself in every human heart and culture and. Even if we still believe that Christ is the fullness of God's revelation, we believe that God has not left himself entirely without witness anywhere at any point in human history.

Romans 1:18-21 talks about how every human being has the capacity to know and honour God by observing creation.

Acts 10:34-35: "God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."

Or we could look to Jesus' own words in response to a question about how to inherit eternal life with, "Love God, love your neighbour. Do this and you will live" (Luke 10:28).

So, inclusivism preserves the centrality of Christ and the exclusivity of his claims to truth and our duty to respond to his call, but acknowledges that human beings do not all have the opportunity to encounter Jesus in the same way.

We are responsible to respond to the light that we are given.

Additionally, those who hold this view read passages 2 Peter 3:9, which says that the Lord doesn't want any to perish but all to come to salvation or 1 Timothy 2:4 which says that God "desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" and wonder, "Is it possible that if God *wants* to save all but can't accomplish this?"

Perhaps the classic articulation of the inclusivist approach to how to view those outside Christianity comes from C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity*:

Here is another thing that used to puzzle me. Is it not frightfully unfair that this new life should be confined to people who have heard of Christ and been able to believe in Him? **But the truth is God has not told us what His arrangements about the other people are. We do know that no man can be saved except through Christ; we do not know that only those who know Him can be saved through Him.**

So, those are broadly speaking the three options.

It probably won't surprise you to hear that my own view is the third one. I think that is a very dangerous business indeed for us to place limits upon the mercy of the God made known to us in Jesus Christ.

I think there is a wideness to God's mercy that we cannot even fathom.

But I think it is very important to make clear why I think this. It is not because of some nebulous appreciation for "inclusivity." This is a word that, like "tolerance," I consider unworthy of Christianity. It does not ask or invite us into nearly enough.

It is also not because I think we should avoid making exclusive claims, even though I know that there are few more egregious sins in our context than to claim to be "exclusive" or to believe something that is true for all and not just for you.

I incline toward this position for one reason and one reason only: because of my convictions about the character of God.

I believe that God is perfect love and that part of this love is perfect justice. I believe that God alone embodies the perfect combination of mercy and patience and judgment and truth.

I believe all of this because I have seen it in Jesus Christ.

And if we have seen Jesus, I think we can resist the temptation to be anxious about the fate of our neighbours and of the world.

Too many theories about judgment make Jesus seem almost schizophrenic. In his life, he saw and understood people perfectly, and responded to each person based on what they needed at that moment.

For some, it was a harsh word of warning (often religious people), for others it was an act of mercy, still others the lifting of a burden or the asking of a penetrating question. Nearly always, he forced people to challenge their assumptions about God and to make a choice.

But often when it comes to the final judgment, we think that this same Jesus will pronounce the eternal sentence based on whether someone said the right prayer once upon a time or has enough right beliefs.

Christ alone sees each human life truly. Christ alone knows what each of us face, what each of us are capable of, what obstacles have been placed in front of us.

Christ alone can be trusted to judge. And we do believe that it is **Christ** who will judge. This is what Christians have confessed from the beginning. *I believe that he will come again to judge the living and the dead.*

In the end, we believe that the Judge of the earth will do what is right with each human being (Genesis 18:25).

But for those of us who have encountered Jesus, those of us who in whatever way have been exposed to his light and truth, those of us who are attracted to his way even if in only partial ways, Jesus' question for us is the same one he addressed to Peter (Matthew 16:15):

Who do you say that I am?

Jesus claims to be the way, the truth, and the life. We are called to answer with our own lives.

In Romans 5, Paul makes a comparison between Adam and Christ. A simplistic reading of this would run along the lines of, “well, Adam ruined things for everyone and Jesus fixes things.” It turns us into spectators in the drama of creation and in our own lives. It takes the responsibility off of us and puts it into the remote past and says, “Well, thank God for Jesus.”

This is true. We *should* thank God for Jesus.

But just as sin requires our consent, so, too, does faith. The story of Adam and Eve describes each one of us and our tendency to choose self over God.

In Christ, God really does undo the sin of Adam. But we are participants in this, not passive bystanders. We are called to respond to whatever light we have received. We are responsible and we are accountable.

I want to close with two short quotes. The first is from William Willimon in his book *Why Jesus?*:

There is, thus, in Jesus a kind of relentless divine reach. I guess that’s why the church, which believes that Jesus saves, has been reluctant to say for sure whether or not Jesus saves people who are not in the church. The church’s reluctance about this matter is not due to the church’s mushy inclusiveness but rather to the church’s disinclination to set limits on just what the love of Jesus can and can’t do. Just when I settle in and try to reduce Jesus’ love to me and my friends huddled in church, I hear him say to (us) the faithful, “The tax-collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you!”

And lastly, from Daniel Migliore’s *Faith Seeking Understanding*:

It is best... to hope and pray, on the basis of the astonishing love of God in Jesus Christ, for a redemption of the world far greater than we are inclined to desire or even able to imagine.

In the end, this is what our hope is based on—for ourselves and for all people. The astonishing love of God in Jesus Christ.

Romans 5:20-21:

But where sin increased, grace increased all the more, 21 so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

The reign of Christ is a reign of grace. Not a cheap grace that says, “do or think whatever you want” but a grace that invites us into the way, the truth, and the life of Christ.

As Christians we believe that divine grace is stronger and more persistent than human sin. This is our deepest hope.

May God help us to accept this, and then to embody and proclaim it to those around us.

Amen.

