

Christ Presbyterian Church
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John Crosby
The Christian Atheist: I Believe in God, but I Want to Be in Control
James 2:19

Would you take one of the Bibles that are in front of you or the one you brought with you and turn to James, chapter 2. James is found toward the end of the Bible, page 1,801 in the pew Bible. I would ask you to also grab your worship bulletin or a scrap of paper and a pen or a pencil because I want you to do some homework during this time together.

We are launching a new series today that we have been thinking about for a year and talking about for months. It is based on a book by Craig Groeschel. He starts the book talking about when he was on an airplane flight that had two legs, went to two different places. On the first leg Craig is seated next to a guy named Travis who asks him what he does. When Craig says he is a pastor, Travis' immediate response was, "I don't believe in God. I think Christians are hypocrites. I think they use religion as a crutch to avoid the real world. No disrespect, but I think Christians are the weakest people in the world." Craig is like, "Well, no disrespect taken." Obviously the guy is an atheist. They had a great conversation.

On the next leg, Craig said that he sat down next to a young woman named Michelle, quite anxious about a lot in her life, nervous about flying so she is chattering. She is having problems with her boyfriend who lives with her and is afraid of commitment, about getting married. She was upset about money, her finances. After a while she asked Craig what he did for a living, and when he said, "I'm a pastor," she went, "Oh" like a lot of people do when I tell them that. Then she sort of lit up. She said, "Ohhh, good, good. I believe in God. I met Jesus a long time ago." Then she started to share confessional kinds of stuff in her life. She said she knew as a Christian that being involved with her boyfriend in the way that they were, living and sleeping together, was not honoring God. She also said, "I want to get involved in a church and change, but I'm just so busy." She said she prayed a lot, usually at night, usually that her boyfriend would become a Christian. She said if only he would believe in Jesus, then maybe he would want to marry her. She started to cry. When she was leaving the plane, she turned around and said, "I know my life doesn't look like what a Christian's life is supposed to look like, but I do believe. I do believe in God."

Groeschel drove home that night and said, "So some people are atheists because they don't believe in God, but many others say that they believe in God but they live in a way that leaves God out of their lives. They are Christian atheists." That is the title of Craig's book, *The Christian Atheist*, and it is the foundation for our series. I would like to put that in another way in the passage you have in front of you from James, talking about faith and atheism. Verse 14 says,

¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if people claim to have faith but have no deeds? Can such faith save them? ¹⁵ Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶ If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? ¹⁷ In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

¹⁸ But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.” Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do.

The second part of verse 18 is what I would like you to underline in the bible.

¹⁹ You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

²⁰ You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless?

You see America often described as a Christian nation, right? But if 94 percent of all Americans say that they believe in a supernatural being, in a God, why is life in America anything *like* what we see on TV? I think it is because among that 94 percent are many who are Christian atheists. I am going to define Christian atheists as people who believe in God but live as if God does not exist.

The reason I was excited about this series and feel like I have some authority is because like many of you, I believe that I am a recovering Christian atheist. That is, there are parts of my life where I say I believe in God, I actually do believe in God, but I live as though God does not exist in that part of my life. There is a disconnect. Maybe many of you feel the same. Part of that is because I think we don't understand what Christianity really is. Christianity is not a set of beliefs, salvation by passing the test. A Christian is not a person who has had an emotional, I-feel-close-to-God experience. A Christian is not person who has a list of do's and don't's and keeps score and as long as they are doing better than the bottom 50 percent, they are okay, and if they get below the bottom 50 percent, they try harder. I don't believe any of those are what a Christian is.

Too often being a Christian in America becomes about labels. We see this on the campaign trail. We hear about liberals and born-again. We hear about progressives and evangelicals, but when we look at people of faith from the outside, the primary labels that they use are legalisms. They are judgmental hypocrites. You probably never heard that before, someone saying that Christians are hypocrites, that is, they talk this way and they live that way.

For a second I would like to stop preaching and start meddling. I would like to give you a test. I would like you to write down five words, that's why I had you bring out your pen or pencil, just write down five words that we will put up on the screen, one at a time for you to say in your life, “Christian” or “Christian atheist.” Rate yourself. “Christian” is a 10. “Christian atheist” is a zero or a one. You are not going to show this to anybody else. Let's start with *identity*. Write down the word *identity*. I think if a person is close to God, if they are a follower of Jesus and that is

important in their life, when they are asked, “What is your identity?” they would say, “I am a confident child of God. I've got nothing to prove. I am loved by God all the time.” A Christian atheist, whether they say it or not, would spend much of their time feeling ashamed or afraid, like they don't measure up or like, “Oh, if you only knew who I was....” Which one are you?

No. 2, you cannot talk about faith in America without talking about *money*. A person who has sold out to their God, to following Jesus, when they live with money, these words would happen. They would say, "I am content with what I have." A lot or a little, "I am content." They would say, "I am responsibly stewarding what I give. I am in not over my head. I am not hoarding." And they would be able to say they are ludicrously generous. A Christian atheist would say, "Well, I'm one of those people who says, "You know on the bill that says, 'In God we trust,' well, in God we believe, in cash we trust." They live out of balance financially. There is a sense of guilt about their giving. They feel like they don't give enough. There is a sense in which, "If I only had a little more, things would be okay." Where are you on that scale?

No. 3 is the word *body*. Are we having fun yet? Body. As a rule, a person who is beloved of God and feeling close to God would believe that their body is a temple of the living God. God lives in them, and that reflects the way that they treat their body, not just sexually but physically, in their exercise, in their sleep, in their diet, in the way they use their body. People at the other end would say, "God gave me this body so it's my body," and in their diet, in their sleep, in their exercise, in their sexuality, pleasure, *that* thing, rules them. Pleasure is the god.

No. 4, *sharing*. This is particularly for Presbyterians who, on the basis of a survey share their faith with another person once every 17 years. If so, if you are in a dynamic, living relationship with God and somebody asks you about it, you don't have to be Billy Graham. The Bible says, "Just be ready, always ready, to give an answer to the hope that is inside you." You will be able to talk about what God has done in your life. That's all. Invite them to join in the journey. If you are a Christian atheist, you would say, "I believe in God, but my faith is private." It is so private, nobody else can hear it. It never comes up. If you ask me if I would rather talk about my faith or sex or politics, I would say, "Let's talk about sexual politics." It is a tough thing to talk about God.

The last of the words in our little test, are you a Christian or a Christian atheist, would be the word *relationships*. Whether it is the person seated next to you or the person who comes to your mind first, if you a follower of God, a Christian, your relationships are marked by these two phrases: one, love your enemies, do good to those who persecute you, and the other is, insofar as it is up to you, live in peace with everyone. Christian atheists would say, "You know, I believe in God but I really act out, 'Don't get mad; get even.' It becomes difficult for me to forgive. I do love people, but it is still mostly about me." In terms of our identity and our money and our body and our sharing and our relationships, we live out or do not live out our faith.

Now what I'd like you to do is, look at that list. Look at your highest number and your lowest number and turn to the person next to you and say, "You dirty hypocrite." I talked about what I think a Christian is *not*. Let me tell you this. I believe that being a Christian is trusting in Jesus Christ. Following Jesus in ways that allow Jesus to live in me and in you and through me and through you so that over time, we begin to live like Jesus would live where you are right now. What has gone wrong with that?

Cory prayed that we would inspire all generations to follow Jesus. How come we're not closer to

Jesus, following with our lives as well as our mouths? I think the problem is that we follow Jesus in this world through enemy territory. Every effort we make wrecks everything. We want to but we don't. The apostle Paul spoke for me. He said, "There seems to be this law of the universe at work. I want to do the good thing, but I keep doing the bad thing. I hate doing the bad thing, but I

end up doing it again and again and again.” He said, “I feel like a prisoner” because he is following Jesus through enemy territory. If people were able to live out what they believe, live it and not just believe it, then the Kingdom of Heaven would be becoming visible all around us. We would see it in schools and in homes and in supermarkets and workplaces, in sports arenas, all around us if we lived it. The Kingdom of Heaven would be becoming present, but I believe there is another power at work in this world. We believe in the work of the evil one, the one who has split us off from God, and that enemy power knows your name.

Three years ago I used this illustration to help me understand why I want to do something, but I don't. At West Point they train cadets to become warriors, to lead wars, and they do that through war games. Often the cadet commanders, captains, are given charge of battlefields and told to lead. War games sometimes happen on a hill like this. (*Slide shown*). This is in New York state. The cadet captain is told that his job is to hold the top of that hill for just forty hours, less than two days. He has enough troops to do it. He is the best and the brightest. He has a week to study the field. He looks all around and deploys his troops. The major in charge gives the order, and the war begins. Twenty-seven minutes later the hill is taken. All the cadets are simulated dead, and he is captured and in disgrace.

At the end of that exercise, they all go back to the academy. The major who was watching the exercise takes the cadets back out to the hill, and they walk around the hill for miles and talk about what went wrong. The major says, “Look at the hill.” The cadet captain goes, “I did. I did.” The major says, “No, you didn't.” “I did.” “No, you didn't. You went to the *top* of the hill. What you need to do is go all the way around the hill and see it from the perspective of the enemy.” Well, if you go around this hill, this is the back. (*Slide shown.*) When they got to the back, the major turned to him and said, “What do you see?” “I see a hill.” “Well, do you see over there on the right? There is a little indentation. That indentation is where the water flows down the hill, and that ravine that formed is where the cadets against you were able to march up, inside that cut in the hill, and be right at the top of the hill before you knew it.” He said, “Son, the fundamental is to always, always put yourself in the position of the enemy. See where they will attack *you* because the way they will attack John is different from the way they will attack Carol. Is different from the way they will attack Gene. Is different from how the evil one will come after Sue.”

The major was Omar Bradley who becomes a four-star general in World War II. The cadet was William Westmoreland. He becomes a three-star general in Vietnam. Bradley never, ever forgot the lesson of the enemy. Westmoreland did. We become Christian atheists because we cannot defend our hill; people attack up the ravines. Know that your battlefield is different from mine. My whole point in this first idea of the Christian atheist is to show you the places where I believe the enemy is stopping you from living it out. Leading it, fine. Talking about it, fine. Living it, that's where the enemy goes for you, goes into action.

The first place, I believe, where the enemy sneaks up on you is the area of pride. “I believe in God, but I want to be in control. I believe in God, but I am in charge.” That's you, and the reason I know that's you is because that's me! That is all of us since Adam and Eve where the serpent said, “Did God really say you had to do that?” and she goes, “Well, yeah, but....” And

then he says, “No. God knows that if you do this, you will be like God. You do whatever you want.” “I want to be in control.” Pride in our lives is not necessarily arrogance. You don't look arrogant usually. Pride is needing your own way instead of submitting. Christians are the ones

who not only believe but submit their money to God. Not just believe but submit their relationships to God, and so they forgive when they don't want to. They serve when they don't want to. They give someone another chance when they don't want to because they have submitted and said, "Not my will but Thine." Christian atheists say, "Not Thy will but mine." And it is very subtle sometimes, but the enemy has stopped you.

The second place that I believe the evil one attacks us is not through pride but through fear. I believe many of you would say, "I believe in God but I'll admit it—I don't trust God enough to ask in faith." Faith is crazy. Faith is nuts. Whether it is saying, "No! I know that if I don't sleep with that man he will never marry me," "I know that if I remain sexually pure, the guys will laugh at me," "I know that if I tell the truth, they will fire me." I believe in God, but I am afraid so I don't trust God enough to act. This is not an emotion. It is that you see what the path of faith is, and you work around it because it is scary to do that, and you stop.

The third path that I believe the enemy uses most often in American Christianity is isolation. I believe American Christians lack a sense of accountability. Many of you are in small groups. That is great. Many of you have lots of friends. That is great. Many of you have spouses who love you. That is wonderful, but there is a lack of accountability in your life. There is a lack of encouragement or perspective in your life, and it is not because, "Oh, I am just an introvert." That has got nothing to do with it. You cannot become a Christian rather than a Christian atheist if you are going it alone. Jesus tells us to pray but He says, "When two or three are gathered together, I am there." Who in your life is saying to you, "You know, you said to me a year ago that you wanted to do a... How is that going"? Who in your life is saying to you, "You screwed up again. I love you. Come on, let's go"? Who in your life is saying, "I'm praying for you this week, and I'll ask you about it next week"?

Pride! "I believe in God, but I'm in charge." Fear! "We believe in God, but we don't trust enough to act." Isolation! "I'm going to go my way. I did it my way." Which ravine are you most susceptible to? Each of us is different. Look at the low score. Look at the ravines. Which one is the danger zone for you? If you can't tell, let's go back to that pride thing. I'm not painting a picture to make you feel guilty. I really am not. I am trying to set the stage for giving you the kind of life where what you believe is the way that you live. Jesus promises, "Come to Me. Come to Me, all of you, because you are weary and heavy-burdened, and I will give you work to do." No! "Come to Me and I will give you rest. I will show you real life." Jesus says, "I have come that you might have life in all its abundance not that you would have a belief system. I have come that you might have life beyond atheism.

The next three weeks we would like to give you three case studies of Christian/Christian atheists and work on some principles together from that. Next week I would like to talk together about the idea that we believe in God but we don't want to talk about it. How would you talk about God? The following week we are going to talk about "I believe in God but I trust in money." The third week because I will be out of the country, Brad is going to talk about sex. "I believe in God but it's my body." We are together in this, friends. Really we are. And the God who loves you, believes in you and will not give up until what we believe comes out in how we live. Let's pray.

Lord, Jesus, I thank You that You love me enough to make me feel uncomfortable sometimes. That You love my sisters and brothers here enough that You are willing to peel off some of the masks between what we say and what we believe and how we live

and those ways that we are Christian atheists. I would ask that Your truth would come and expose us, that Your grace would come and forgive us, and that Your power would come and show us how to follow You in those areas of our lives. In the Name of the Father, Son, and Spirit. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.