

**Christ Presbyterian Church**  
**Edina, Minnesota**  
**February 4 & 5, 2012**  
**John Crosby**  
**The Christian Atheist: I Believe in God, but I don't Want to Talk About It**  
**Luke 9:25-26**

Would you guys take out the Bibles in the pews in front of you and turn to the ninth chapter of the Gospel of Luke. Thanks. Luke 9. It's on page 1,543. These Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, are stories whose primary purpose is to answer the question, "Who is Jesus?" and in different ways they answer that question. In Luke chapter 9 Jesus has just spent a lot of time teaching, and the crowds have come. He sees the crowds and turns to the disciples and says, "Who do they think I am?" The disciples say, "Well, some think You are a prophet, and some think You are Elijah come back from the dead, and some think You may be the King." He turns to the disciples and says, "Well, who do you think I am?" Peter says, "I think You are the Messiah. I think You are God's holy one." That is right before the part we are going to read today. Then right *after* the part we are going to read today, Jesus walks up on a hill with His closest friends and is transformed. We don't even know what that would look like, but He shines like the sun so that His friends look at Him and say, "This is not just an ordinary man. What's going on here?" The purpose of the Gospels is to say who Jesus is, but they are also a chance for Jesus to talk to us, so look at your Bibles, verse 23. It says,

<sup>23</sup> Then he said to them all: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. <sup>24</sup> For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it. <sup>25</sup> What good is it for you to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit your very self?"

Then, if it is not already underlined your Bible, would you underline this next line because it is the one we want to talk about.

<sup>26</sup> If any of you are ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man...

That is what Jesus calls Himself,

...the Son of Man will be ashamed of you when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.

That is the story about Jesus and people who follow Jesus, Christians. They believe that. I believe that. I think many of you believe that. But is that enough, to just believe it? We are in the middle of a series called *The Christian Atheist* based on Craig Groeschel's book. He says, "There is a difference between believing in God but living as if God doesn't exist." I held this book up last week and said you could get a copy at Pathway [CPC bookstore], but then they were all out of them. They have more copies now.

One of the things that Groeschel says is that Christians believe this, but Christian atheists believe it, too, that Jesus said, "If you are ashamed of Me, I will be ashamed of you." They also believe that Jesus wants us to stand up for Him but instead, all too often you and I stay silent about Jesus, about our faith, and in that sense, we are Christian atheists. We are living without God.

Yesterday right before the Saturday service, I was doing a funeral. It is always striking to me that you come here and you listen okay, but you just come and hear. People who come to weddings listen maybe a little more because they are happy. People who come to a funeral are leaning forward. They are really, really listening. For once they are sober. They want to hear about their friend whom they have lost. They realize that we are all on that same journey toward death and they listen hard. "What is really going to happen?" It made me realize at that funeral yesterday that all of us have times when we think about the things we wish we had said, the things that we didn't say, whether it was to somebody who was dying and now they are gone or maybe it was to somebody who was in your dorm in college. You had this thing you never said, whether it was "I love you," "I am sorry," whatever, or something you didn't say to a kid or a neighbor or—fill in the blank. We all have those things we know are important to say, but we don't say them.

I thought about that after the funeral because it reminded me of when I was a young pastor in Washington, D.C. Laura and I had gone there as newlyweds practically. I was an associate pastor, and it was my day to visit the hospitals. We knew that this person was in the hospital because his wife had called and said, "My husband is in the hospital. Would somebody go visit him." The note that was handed to me said, "And the wife says, 'Would you ask him about his faith?'" This was a couple who attended faithfully, every Christmas and every other Easter, so you wondered about their faith. I am going to the hospital, and I realize that I've heard this name before, Warren Burger. I am going, "Where have I heard this name before?" This is who Warren Burger is. (*Slide shown.*) He is the Chief Justice of the U. S. Supreme Court, just retired. He is from Minnesota, by the way, but I had never heard of Warren Burger or Minnesota at that point, yet he had just been retired as Chief Justice for a year. He is in the hospital, and his wife wants me to talk to him about God. So I go in, and I look at him, and he looks even more Chief Justice- in a hospital bed than he does there [in the slide], and I'm like, "Do you know who you are?"

I was a little, you know, but he was great. He put me at ease. He said, "Tell me, what do you think of Washington?" and we spent most of the next 20 minutes talking about the Redskins because we were both football people. He had some great stories and about 20 minutes in, I am just about to say, "Yeah, I think the strong safety is not going to work. What do you think about Jesus?" because I know I'm supposed to do that. Right at that point he says, "Hey, son, why don't you give me a little prayer" and go. He didn't add the "*and go*", but it was clear to me that he meant "Why don't you give me a little prayer and go," and that is what I did. I gave him a little prayer, and I left. On the way out I am just whacking myself in the head. "Come on, it was there. You should have asked him. This is stupid." But I didn't say anything. So the next day, I was determined that I would go back to the hospital, but by then he was out, and I never saw him again. Justice Burger died. I don't know.

But I do know that talking about God has eternal stakes. That what we believe about God is literally a matter of heaven or hell, with God or without God, and that people can't know about that unless somebody talks to them about it. It is true for them when you are at the funeral

home, and it is true for them here and now. Just yesterday I was at Starbucks and one of our student ministers came in. He sees me and finds the seat farthest away. I look over, and he has a young man from college joining him. This student minister meets with this young man who has just graduated from college almost every week. I go up to refresh my coffee, and they wave me over and say, "Hey, maybe you could help us answer this question. It is about pornography. 'Is this one of the things that is going to send me to hell or is it just sort of bad?'"

Okay! They don't talk about this in seminary, but this is exactly what we are talking about. This is real life, real faith, real differences, and this guy and his only slightly older friend are sharing what a difference the Gospel makes. That is so important! But when we think about sharing God's story, what do we think of? You know what I think of? When I think about evangelism, I think of televangelists. That is what I think of. Talking about God; televangelists. I saw a survey the other day. Televangelism is rated the 37<sup>th</sup> occupation in a list of occupations, number 37 out of 37. Televangelists are listed below prostitutes. Televangelists are listed below politicians. Why? Why would somebody whose job it is to talk about the good news.... It is because we are suspicious, right? We are suspicious when people talk to us about God. Or if the shoe is on the other foot and we are supposed to talk about God, we are afraid or we are guilty. I know I am supposed to do it, but we are afraid or we don't know how. We don't know what to say. It never seems like the right time.

I want to talk about that because I think when Jesus says, "If you are ashamed of Me, I'll be ashamed of you," this is what He is talking about and He is not kidding around. He is not trying to make you feel guilty. He is trying to show you the stakes, so pull out that *Message Gear* [flyer], would you please. Pull out *Message Gear* because I think we need help. Probably you are going to need a second look at this beyond this little half-hour. Let's start with where you feel like you are, ashamed of God or bold for God. If you have a pen or pencil, just write down where you are on this on a scale of one to ten, bold or ashamed. Let's put it up here on the screen. (*Slide shown.*) Let's say bold is Billy Graham. In his sleep the guy goes, "Would you come to Jesus?" In his sleep! That is ten, but a zero would be Peter. Remember Peter when Jesus is arrested? "I'll go with You anywhere." "Peter, before the next sun comes up, you are going to deny three times that you even know Me."

Some of us basically deny our faith in the face of questions. Zero to ten, where are you? Are you like a six? You are not Billy Graham, but you know the story. You know your story. If somebody asks, you don't force yourself but you share your faith. Or are you like a two or a three? You are a private person. You are a Presbyterian. I mean for goodness sakes! And the idea of sharing is a rare thing for you. So where are you? Are you a Christian follower, obedient? Or are you more of a Christian atheist in this area of your life? It depends, doesn't it? Part of it depends on what I mean by sharing your faith. Let me quickly just go through that.

There is a little pyramid up on the screen because not everybody is supposed to do everything about sharing their faith. At the very top of the pyramid, done by very few of us, is what is called *apologetics*. Evangelism is apologetics in the sense that people will have questions about God, and they want answers. Often they are hostile questions, and the purpose of apologetics is to know the answers for people who have hostile questions about faith. It would be apologetics if somebody would come up to you and say, "How can a good God allow suffering? Really?" "Do you really believe that God sends people to hell?" "Do you really believe in this day that there is only one way to God?" Okay, it is your turn to answer these questions. That is apologetics.

Apologetics is for people who are trained in the faith and know how to answer and love that back-and-forth kind of stuff. It is not all of us. It is not even most of us. Apologetics, though, is part of what it means to give an answer for your faith.

Another part that more of us are involved in is down farther on the pyramid. More of us are involved in this. It is called *proclamation*, telling the story. Do you ever tell the story, the story of God, not as in “And in Genesis 3 and in Genesis 6 and in Matthew...”? Not that story. If somebody ever asks you, “How do you know you are a Christian? How do you become a Christian?” would you be able to tell the story? Just because we need help with that, may I take just three minutes and tell you a story. We’ve got a link to this on our website. When we talk about becoming a Christian, the temptation, if somebody asks you, is to make it too simple. You fly or you fry. That is simple. That is cookie-cutter. Or to make it too complex and too fuzzy, “Well, the ancient Hebrews thought this but the mystics think that, and if you, you know, turn around three times....” How do you make it straight?

I think it is something like this. If somebody asks, you say, “I believe your life is part of a story, a part of God’s bigger story. The Bible talks about the story of a God who loves us and is working to rescue us. That is the story that He is telling.” I believe that when you go outside and you see the beauty of creation, you, like most of us, assume that there is probably a Creator.” Creation/creator! Beauty and good! This God must be big and good, but then right away, I guess I would say that creation is broken. “It is a good world, but it is broken. It is filled with ugly, evil, painful sin. Things out there aren’t the way they are supposed to be.”

I have got to tell you, things aren’t the way they are supposed to be in here in me, and I tell my friends, “I think God made the world perfect for us, but God also gave us boundaries. God loved us enough to say, ‘I know what is best whether you know it or not. Don’t touch the stove.’” But because God loved them, because God loved us, He gave us choices: that we could love God back by choosing to obey or not, and we believe that Adam and Eve chose “or not.” And that every day you and I choose “or not.” And that every time people choose “or not,” that choice breaks the world, the world God created. That world is broken, and you and I are broken because people chose over and over to set God aside and go our own way, and no matter how hard we try to be good, we fall short, don’t we? By the way, that is what the Bible means by sin, falling short. You want to do this. You end up here, and no matter how hard you try, you can’t get up there. We are broken, and the biggest consequence to that brokenness is what we call death, death and the end of the world. Physical death. Fear of death. But also the death of the brokenness of our relationship with God. I feel that in my heart.

The reason that a Christian talks about good news is because they know the bad news, but the good news is that God loves us so much that when we chose *not*, He won’t take that as our final answer. God comes after us again and again. God will come and get us, and our story is that in Jesus, God becomes flesh and lives a life the way it was supposed to be lived. He offered Himself even in death to bring us back to God somehow. We are not going to understand exactly how, but God let Jesus’ death bring us back to God. He doesn’t just die for us; He overcomes death itself. When I am at a gravesite, I say, “This is not the end. Christ has overcome death by coming back to life.” Christ came back to life. That is what makes Christianity different from any other religion. We believe Jesus died, and He came back to life. So the guy says, “Yeah, but how do I become a Christian?” I say, “I think anybody who turns to Jesus is the image of the invisible God. I believe that Jesus is the image of the invisible God.

Anybody who acknowledges that we are broken, that we can't fix ourselves, and asks for forgiveness, anybody who turns and trusts in Jesus, asking Him to help us follow Him, to obey Him, they have a new way of life. They become a part of what the Bible calls the Kingdom of Heaven. God offers anybody who does that a clean slate. God wipes out the past and gives us a new life that lasts forever, starting right now." That is the story. Three minutes and six seconds.

But you probably can't get somebody to sit still for three minutes and six seconds to give them the story, can you? I think there is sharing that is apologetics, and there is sharing that is proclamation, but I think what Jesus is talking about there is sharing that is *your story*, your testimony, sharing how faith shapes *your* life. Remember last week we said Peter who denied Jesus says, "I wasn't ready"? "*Always be ready to give an answer for the hope that is inside you but with gentleness and respect*" (1 Peter 3:15). A lot of times you are going to give that story to people who already believe. It encourages them the way that Emily's baptism encourages me that we are on the right track, but a lot of times you are going to be in places where you can share that story, and it will take courage, and it will feel unnatural. That is why Jesus says, "Don't be ashamed of Me. Do it."

You need help to do it so write this down on that little scratchpad how can you share your story. First, you have to **KNOW GOD** yourself. I don't mean to say, "Duh," but you can't share what you don't know. You need to say, "That story that John told? I believe that story. I've bought into that. I am not perfect but that is who I am. I am a follower of Jesus." You need to know God, and in the same way, you need to know how to listen to God, to listen to God for the whispers that He gives us. I believe God talks to you. I believe God talks to me, and when I listen, things happen. I believe God talks to us most often through the Bible. That is why we are crazy about reading the Bible here.

Tuesday morning I am in a men's study, and we are studying the story of Jesus, the sower of the seeds. Remember the good seed? Jesus throws seeds on different soils. One of the guys says, "Okay, I get it. I get it. I am supposed to spread those seeds again and again because it's for different people at different times." Then he goes, "Well, yeah." God spoke to him. May I tell you, God talked to me just this morning? Just this morning. I was in Starbucks reading. My daily reading was Titus 1, and it could have said right there, "John!" Titus 1 says this, "I am God's servant and Christ's agent for promoting faith, getting out the accurate word on God and how to respond. My call is to raise hope by pointing the way to life without end." Titus says, "This is the life God promised, and God does not break His promises." *That is my job*. God spoke to me this morning. The less often I listen, the less I hear, but the more often I listen, I know God. That is No. 1.

No. 2 is easier in some ways. We are supposed to know God, but we are also supposed to **KNOW OTHERS**. I don't think you are called to go out and share your story on Route 100, especially not beginning on a bumper or with a whack. Don't go do it then. Don't say, "Jesus loves you; there is a wonderful plan for your life" as you are exchanging insurance cards. You are supposed to share with people that you know. You are supposed to know others so that as you know others, you can say, "What is the real question that you have?" Where are they really hurting? What are their real hopes? What are their dreams? We share life in Christ when we serve, when we forgive, when we draw other people into life that is really life, when we model hope, when we forgive one another.

Sharing the Gospel usually is very little about what you say and very much about whom you are and what you do. I love St. Francis of Assisi: "Preach the Gospel at all times. Use words only when necessary." First we are supposed to know God. Then we are supposed to know others. The next step is to **KNOW OUR STORY**. When they know us, they begin to trust us. Sooner or later when they trust us, we will have an opportunity to share with them. God doesn't want you to tell *my* story. God doesn't usually want you to tell the four spiritual laws. God wants you to tell what Jesus has done in *your* life, and so instead of telling you, let me just show you in three minutes. Our student ministry here tracks a lot of people who don't know Jesus very well, and one of them told her story here. The story is always: *how it used to be*, *what God did*, and *how my life has changed*. This young woman's name is Annie McNeill. When Annie was talking about her story, she started by talking about how her life *was*.

*(Video shown.)*

*Annie:* I didn't really know a ton about God growing up until a friend in eighth grade invited me to come to commitment class. I just loved it. It was so exciting, asking all these questions, wrestling with big issues. I actually ended up opening up to my small group that I was struggling with cutting. My grandma had just died on my birthday while I was at camp, and it was just a really, kind of tumultuous summer.

*John:* How she used to be. She knew *about* God but her life was tumultuous. When she talks about cutting, Annie is talking about that OCD, obsessive-compulsive disorder, where people, usually young women, start to whack themselves, first their hands, then with their nails, then with their keys, then with a knife, cutting themselves, marring themselves, causing themselves pain, often as a result of depression. The pain actually forms an odd, sick stimulant to them, and she was cutting, made worse by the death of her grandma. That is how life used to be. Then she talks about what happens.

*Annie:* Then I came into going on Summit Two as a junior, and that is when it came to a pinnacle for me. My small group just kind of said to me, they were just like, "Where are you? What are you doing with yourself? God loves you so much." I talked with Brooke, and she helped me be able to tell my parents about what I had been struggling with through my high school years.

*John:* What did God change in Annie's life? He brought her into some friends who said, "You are better than this. God loves you so, so much. It doesn't have to be like this." And they put her in little Brookie's life, and young Brooke, I say young Brooke but she is 30 years old, young Brooke's life. Brooke loved her, and Brooke went with her to her mom and dad and said, "God is giving Ann a new chance. Can we help her together?" But God did it. How life was, what God did, and then she talks about what difference it is making in her life.

*Annie:* Now as a senior I am just so excited and happy. I feel like God with the help of my small group and friends and people who want me around has really started to clear that curtain of depression away, and it has just been so awesome ever since.

Guys, that is 78 seconds where Annie shares with somebody what she was, what God did, and what a difference it makes. She is not arguing with anybody. She is not trying to intellectually

persuade anyone. She is just saying, “I am not ashamed of what Jesus did in my life. God saved me.” That is what God is calling you to do, to look into your life, to see your story, not from 40 years ago, but what your life used to be, what God is doing, and what difference that makes.

People won't listen to a three-minute lecture unless they are in church or they have got a test, but they will listen to your story because they are hungry to know that God could work in their life, too. So what is your next step? Well, I guess for all of us, our next step is to decide whether I know God or not. If I don't, maybe I ought to talk about that. But if I know God, then maybe my next step is to figure out how I can tell my story, and that is why, at the bottom of *Message Gear*, we offer you those four options.

You can let this just be another sermon or you can use the power of God to share your story in a way that will change somebody else's eternity and yours, too.

Lord Jesus, I thank You that You were here this morning, listening to us and cheering us on, helping us realize that each of us has stories of despair and hope and faith and life, and when we come together and share our stories, Your power goes to work to love and break down barriers, to bring life and Your love. I thank You for Annie's courage to share her story. I pray that You will bring us to life, to see who needs to hear what You are doing. Jesus, gather us around Your table again where we can see others with their stories, their hungers. Where we can see You feeding each one of us. Take this juice and this bread and turn them into the very presence of God who saves among us and as we share it with each other, help us to share Your story in us. 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.*