

**Christ Presbyterian Church**  
**Edina, Minnesota**  
**February 25 & 26, 2012**  
**John Crosby**  
**Spiritual Disciplines: Solitude**  
**Luke 5:15-17**

We started the year with four weeks of sermons called *The Christian Atheist*, an odd title but it is from the book we used as a guideline. *The Christian Atheist* centers around the idea that almost everybody believes in God, but most people who believe that Christ is God are also Christian atheists. That is, they believe in God but live as if God does not exist. Their beliefs are over *here* but their actions are over *there*. We've talked about different places in our lives where even if we believe in God, our lives don't reflect it in the hope that we would be able to start living out our beliefs.

Now in Lent as we use these next weeks to prepare for the coming of the risen Christ, we want to give you some tools that will allow the gap between *what I believe* and *how I live* to come a little closer together. Remember how we talked several weeks ago about how followers of Jesus would be covered by the dust of the Rabbi Jesus? We want to get close enough to Christ so that as He walked, His dust would fall upon us and change us. We would start to experience life the way that Jesus did. Does your life look anything like the life of Jesus? Dr. Luke tells a story about one day in Jesus' life, and it went like this.

<sup>12</sup> While Jesus was in one of the towns, a man came along who was covered with leprosy. When he saw Jesus, he fell with his face to the ground and begged him, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean."<sup>13</sup> Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" And immediately the leprosy left him.<sup>14</sup> Then Jesus ordered him, "Don't tell anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them." Yet the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses.<sup>16</sup> But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.

<sup>17</sup> One day Jesus was teaching, and Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting there. They had come from every village of Galilee and from Judea and Jerusalem. And the power of the Lord was with Jesus to heal the sick.<sup>18</sup> Some men came carrying a paralyzed man on a mat and tried to take him into the house to lay him before Jesus.<sup>19</sup> When they could not find a way to do this because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and lowered him on his mat through the tiles into the middle of the crowd, right in front of Jesus.

I think we will stop there. It was just like your Tuesday, wasn't it? It is just like Thursday is going to be for you. But maybe it is not so different. The first thing that strikes me about this is, Jesus lives a very busy life. You live a very busy life. You are overscheduled, and you run so fast that

you get tired. You and Jesus have that in common. It never seems to stop. You also live a very loud life. As I listen to these stories about a paralyzed man being ripped through the roof and a leper crying out and people surrounding Him, His life was loud. It was messy. My life is loud, partly because sometimes I like it loud. I wake up in the morning, and I turn on the TV. I get in the car, and I turn on the radio. Our lives are fast and loud and can seem overwhelming. You may not have lepers coming up to you or people ripping through your roof but in many ways, at times your life seems overwhelming, doesn't it? Like you are never quite able to do what you want to do.

Maybe Jesus' life was a lot more like our lives than we think. I want to live like Jesus lived His life, but I never seem to manage it for long. He lived in a loud world. I do. He lived in a busy world. I do. He lived with overwhelming things happening. I do, but I want to live like Him, and no matter how hard I *try*, it doesn't seem to last for long. Make that the keyword, no matter how hard I *try*. I am starting to believe that this life that Jesus wants me to experience is not about trying harder. I think that Christians are big on trying harder, but I don't think that that is going to make it. There has got to be another way.

Anybody here dance? Just raise your hand? Come on, some of you dance, I know you do. Okay, okay. But when it comes to dancing, I hate it. I hate to dance. This has been a bone of contention in our marriage for 29 years. We have only been married 28. And the reason I hate to dance is because there is a difference between what is happening in *here* and what is happening down *there*. When I think of dancing, this is what I think I'm doing.

*(Video shown.)*

That is what I think dancing looks like for me. But the reality is, my wife says dancing for me looks like this.

*(Video shown.)*

At best. But because she loves me so much and she wants me to be able to dance at my children's weddings, she wanted me to learn how to dance. I just didn't want the children to date. It would take care of the thing the same way. So this is the year I got dance lessons from a friend. Oh, honey, thank you. You shouldn't have. And I meant it. She shouldn't have. But she got two or three of our friends, and as couples we went to a dance studio. The guy said, "Show me what you got," and I showed him. We've had four lessons so far. There will not be a fifth, but we've had four lessons, and now, Fred Astaire, baby, right here. One-two-three. One-two-three. One-two-three. That's it. The kids can date now.

I'm just using that silly little illustration to show that it is not a matter of trying harder. Any of us could try as hard as we wanted, and we would not look like that video. We could not dance like that but that does not mean we cannot dance. It means we haven't learned. We need to learn in tiny little ways to take tiny little steps that will help us. And if we do the tiny little steps, we will move toward the dance. John Ortberg says it this way. "I need to arrange my life in ways that allow me to do by practicing what I cannot currently do by desire." I can desire to dance, but unless I live my life in a way that allows me to practice little things, I will never be able to do what I currently desire to do.

That is what for 2,000 years the church has called spiritual disciplines. They are little ways, little practices, little lessons, little exercises that teach us to live like Jesus did, the idea being that we can't do it today or tomorrow, but a year from now, we won't be Fred Astaires, but we will have learned a little more of how to live like Jesus. We would like to show you five dance steps in Lent, five spiritual exercises.

Jesus showed us the most important one in today's Scripture reading. I bet almost everybody missed it. It was buried in there, right in the middle, verse 16. It is only nine words long. It says, "But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed." In the midst of all that noise, in the midst of all that busyness, in the midst of being overwhelmed, it says that Jesus often withdrew to be alone and pray. So if I want to learn to live like Jesus, I have to start by having time for silence and solitude, for looking at my life, my soul. It makes sense, right? I'm not going to be able to get there from here unless I figure out where *here* is and for me to have times when, like Jesus, I see where I'm supposed to go and where I am. I need a time to do that where it's quiet and maybe a place to do it where it is safe, and I need to do it often enough so I can see when I have gone off track.

It is not rocket science. It is just hard. Dallas Willard is a theologian who is a mentor to John Ortberg. We have had John here to preach. He got a job at a neat church out in Menlo Park, California where he was the senior pastor. He didn't want it to wreck his life so he called Dallas Willard and he said, "Dallas, what do I need to do to have a great ministry and stay sane?" There was this pause at the other end of the line like there often is when you talk to Dallas Willard. You have the idea that he is actually thinking about what you have just asked. Then Willard said, "John, you must ruthlessly eliminate hurry from your life." John is writing that down and he says, "Okay, I've got that one. What else?"

That is our problem. In a busy, loud, overwhelming world, we are on to "What's next?" but Jesus says, "Stop. Be quiet. You will never get there from here unless you figure out where you are now. You need a time to do it in silence and a safe place to do it and you need to do it more than once. So we would like to offer you a tool. This is one of my favorite sermons of the year because I don't have to do all the work. You do. At the end of each of the pews are baskets. Would everybody take a basket. In it there should be packets, envelopes with a smaller envelope with a spiritual inventory inside. Everybody grab one of the packets and a pen and pass the basket down the aisle. We did this last night and had a little problem, so I'm going to tell you right now, "Class, write your name on the outer envelope. If you are really smart, write your name and your address, but write your name on the outer envelope." Everybody please take a packet whether you intend to do this or not. You may take it home with you and decide you want to do this later.

This is called the *examen*. *Examen* is where we get the word *examination*, tests. This is a way to show how we are doing on the journey but the problem is, we have the idea we don't like tests. Is there anything in the world worse for you than going in for your flu shot? I went in for my flu shot this year and the doctor said, "Oh, you just need a few pushups." The nurse comes in, and I say, "I've got my sleeve rolled up." She says, "Oh, that's good. We'll do that in just a second. Here, step on the scale, will you?" "Well, no, no. I'm here for the flu shot." "No, just step on the scale. I want to see how you've done from year to year." I said, "You know, it is winter. I've got the heavy coat, the boots. Lunch just now. I am not getting on the scale." I got on the scale. That is what I think of tests. That is probably how you think of examinations. I had a friend

who went to the doctor last week. The doctor gave him a test he didn't want, and that test is going to save his life. They found cancer early, and that is going to save his life. They never would have found it if he hadn't had the test.

There are positive examinations, aren't there? There is a test that shows whether you are pregnant. Or whether you are *not* pregnant. There are positive tests when the scales show you have lost weight, when the test results show that you got into that school, when you get a review at work that shows you are actually better liked by your colleagues than you thought you were. You would never know that if it were not for an examination, the *examen*. Not so much a test as it is a stopping point to look for directions to see where you are.

You and I live in a strange world. We live in a world of dirt and stone, of roads and houses, of lilies and leopards, of Planet Saturn and the City of San Diego. We live in a world of cradles and coffins, but at the very same time with all those things you can see, you live in a different world. At the same time you live in an unseen world of goodness and evil, a world of patience and fear, a world of forgiveness and sin, a world of faith and hope and love, and none of those things can be seen. They are like the wind that blows in the trees. You can see the leaves on the tree move, but you cannot see the wind. That is what this is about, to help you see the invisible. I bet this is part of what Jesus was doing over and over. He got off alone, and He took out his life, and He looked for signs of where God was working and where God was absent. Every one of us needs to do that.

Last year about 2,000 of you filled this out. And 600 to 800 of you wrote your name and address on both of the envelopes and left the packet in the back as you left the sanctuary. That was great because the previous year, only 300 to 400 of you did it. I'm hoping this year we will double again. If you put your name on the envelope, we would love to send it back to you right away. Then next year we will send you a copy so you will see how you're doing. Just this last month several hundred of you got last year's inventory. Let me just say one more thing about this before we start. It is fatal to reduce faith to an explanation. Faith is not an explanation. It is not a test. It is a journey, and it is *your* journey. It cannot be predicted. It cannot be programmed. It just happens—by getting on the road, and falling, and getting lost, and getting up, and running—on the way, the way of Jesus. This is for you. It is not for me. It is not for anybody else. This is for you, to do as much or as little as you want. As a matter of fact, I want to reinforce that. Would you please turn to the person next to you and say, "He said not to show this to you." Okay? If that's your spouse next to you, they won't believe it, but everybody else, it's just for you.

We are going to take 15 minutes and do this together. On the very back panel, this is easy stuff, when I say, what were the last 12 months like? Write down one or two words, three words maximum. What were the last 12 months like? What is the first word that comes to you? For some of you, it will be pain. For some of you, it will be an event. For some, it will be an emotion. For some, it will be an image. I am going to write down, sabbatical. During the last 12 months, we had a sabbatical and it was a wonderful thing for us. But what was it like for you? One or two or three things. Loss? Divorce? Death? Birth? Move? Job? House? What was it? That is the setting that this year is different from last year.

Our mission statement as a church says that we want to *inspire all generations to follow Jesus, love others, and live missionally* so we put these three categories into the inventory. It all starts

with saying we want to follow Jesus, so open the first panel. On that first panel where it says **Follow Jesus**, you see six different ways to follow Jesus. But wait a second, what does follow Jesus mean? Three weeks ago our new members joined at the 11:00 service, and one of the young women was baptized. She had never been baptized as a baby and she said, "I want to follow Jesus," so she was baptized. After the service her father came up to me, it was the first week of The Christian Atheist series, and he said, "You know what? That was my stepdaughter you baptized, and I am the Christian atheist. My heart was hard, but today when I saw my stepdaughter baptized, I realized that God loves me, and God loves her, and I want to follow Jesus. How do I do that?" He started the journey.

Where are you on the journey of following Jesus? Do you feel like you are able to receive God's love and forgiveness? Put an "x" on one end of the spectrum or the other. Completely true or not? Are you intentionally learning about the character and priorities of Jesus? Completely true or not? Put an "x" on the spectrum. Do you find that following Jesus is life-giving for you and not just a religious duty? If that is happening, put an "x" toward completely true. I regularly talk with and listen to God. Is that true or not so much? On that line, where would you put yourself? I rely on Biblical truths to direct my daily life, not just hearing it but following what the Bible says. And then 6., your body is in worship today, but do you participate in regular, meaningful worship? On the line, where are you? Completely true or not much at all?

Now before we go on, here is all I want you to do, and again, this is just for you. We are going to give you about one minute of silence, 30 seconds, and some soft music to help you focus. What I'd like you to do is look at this list and put a plus in one place where you see, hey, this is better than it's been at other times in my life and then circle one of the areas where you would like to grow. Let's do that together in silence. *(Pause.)*

Jesus says that the greatest commandment is to learn to love God, to follow Jesus with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind and the second greatest commandment is to **Love Others** as you love yourself, so let's look at that panel. In the children's sermon last month Laura talked about a group of little fourth or fifth grade boys who played in a summer baseball league. Some of them found out that their friends didn't go to VBS [Vacation Bible School] or church any more, so they invited their friends. They said, "C'mon, it's a lot of fun. You'll learn stories about Jesus. We'll have a great time." Those kids came and had a great time, and many of them have started to come to Wednesday nights now because they were loved by somebody else.

How about you? Does your faith help you demonstrate compassion for the hurting? Think of the last time that happened. Put an "x" on the line. If somebody were to ask you, "Does your faith impact the relationships in your family? Do they see that? Is that way true or not so much? How about work? Do you take your faith to work, or does it stay at home and at church? Loving others means getting to know other people well enough, so are you part of any small group that encourages your spiritual growth? Not that just talks about bowling on Thursday nights, that cares about you. Are you part of that? Are you in a relationship with anybody other than a spouse who challenges you and encourages you with the truth? Is that true? Are you loving other people? And perhaps the acid test, do you offer forgiveness when you have been hurt? Think of that person, that last person who did something. Is forgiveness taking root in that? Again, in silence, after you've finished those little "x"s, put a plus next to the one you feel good about and a circle around the one where you would like to be different, where you don't know how but where you would like to be different. *(Pause.)*

We believe God wants to inspire all generations to follow Jesus and to love others, and following Jesus doesn't just mean following Jesus to church because you only do that once a week at most. Following Jesus must mean following Jesus *out* of church so that out there, you live as if you are on a mission following Jesus. Do you **Live missionally**? I just got back from south Florida. While I was down there, we had a gathering of CPC folks, and I spent a little time with a friend down there. I said, "So what happened last year? What has been the best thing about your last year?" He said, "That's easy. I've got a little brother." I said, "Really!" He is 70 years old. He said, "No, no, I have a little brother. Big brother, little brother, that kind of thing. We meet once a week. It's been four years now. He was 13, an immigrant from Haiti, barely spoke English. He is graduating from high school this spring."

He said, "John, you wouldn't believe this." He is getting passionate about this. He says, "I want you to hear this." He says, "The other day we sat down together." I said, "Son, I do not want to hear that you have gotten any woman pregnant other than your wife." "Okay." I said, "Hey, son, if you can't get a job, you come and see me." "Hey, son, I love the way you honor your mom and dad. You need to make sure that they are cared for." "Son, if you get to school and it's too hard, you call me." He said this kid was just lapping it up like ice cream with a spoon. Then he said, "You know what? The more I said, the more excited I got, the more I loved this kid."

That is it. That is taking Jesus out of the sanctuary and putting Him into somebody's life in a way that disrupts your life and enriches it forever. How are you doing in this area of following Jesus? Do you know what your spiritual gifts are? Do you believe that you have God-given gifts to serve others and if so, where would the "x" on that line be? Are you using your gifts? Do you believe that introducing people to Jesus is important to you as a person? Is that a value in your life or something you wish were of value because it ties into the next one? Do you know your own story? You don't have to preach to somebody, but you do need to know your own story. Could you tell somebody why you believe? What difference it is making? I can share my faith story and can do so when appropriate. No. 4., Do you feel like people in your life see a difference in your character because of the way that you follow Jesus? No. 5., Do you honor God with your spending habits? Do you honor God with your giving? One of the ways we do that is to get out of the bubble here. Have you served in any way across cultural boundaries in the last 12 months? Again, in silence, a plus for progress, a circle for desire to grow. (*Pause.*)

God doesn't want life to be confused with taking tests at school, but God knows I'll never learn how to dance if I don't do it in small steps. As you look at the last panel, if you see one of those things in **following Jesus or loving others or living missionally** that you would like to take a next step on, write it down. Look back at the other three things and just write down in one or two words the phrase that in the next 12 months, you would most like to take a small step toward or at least that you desire to take a small step toward.

And then because I did this poorly last night, here is what I want you to do. I want you to take the inventory and stuff it into the big envelope. Are you with me so far? You can just take it home with you if you like, or if you want to join about a thousand others and have us mail it back to you this next week and at Christmas have us send you a copy, just self-address both of these envelopes. It is not hard. You will see on the big envelope that there is a place to say, "I want to have my inventory reviewed by a pastor or an elder." That is just my promise that if you would like one of the pastors or elders or me, I looked at about three-quarters of these last year, to read it and write you a little note of encouragement and pray for you, check that. It is completely

up to you. This is for us an unusual week. If you are a first-time visitor, wow, did you pick the wrong week! Or maybe not, maybe not. This is who we are, and we want to use the rest of Lent to give dance lessons, small steps in arranging our lives in ways that allow us to do by practicing what we cannot currently do by desire. I would love for you to be able to follow Jesus a little better at Easter, better than you do right now. I would love for you to dance.

Lord Jesus, I thank You very much that You didn't just say, "Well, suck it up and try harder." You got off alone by Yourself with the Father and looked at Your life, the things You were delighted by, the things You were afraid of, the things that You saw coming ahead. I pray that You will help my sisters and brothers do that, that this tiny little tool can be a sign, a roadmap, a small step toward learning to dance with You better. Bless all the people who filled this out. Bless all the people who did not. Give courage to the ones who dropped it in the basket that they would be reminded of what they said here today, and love us all. In the Name of the Father and of the Son and the 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.*