

Christ Presbyterian Church
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John Crosby
Jesus in His Own Words: I AM the Light of the World
John 8:12

I feel as though parts of me are still recovering from last weekend with Archbishop Chacour, who was just such a breath of life to so many of us. Then the great discussion that we had about the Middle East on Wednesday will continue this coming Wednesday evening from another perspective, the Israeli perspective. Chacour's appearance and that discussion made clear to me more and more that religion doesn't count for much in the sense that all the man-made things we think are so important probably are not, but religion in the sense of what we think about God and who God is matters incredibly because it ends us up in very different places. We want to talk about that this next month. What do we really believe about things that we have heard so often that they lose their value? Sometimes a voice like Chacour's from the outside really helps us.

I'd like to bring you into a conversation by a noted theologian, Bono. For those of you who don't know, Bono is the lead singer in the most famous rock group of the 20th and 21st century, an international rock star on a bunch of levels. He agreed to do an interview with a friend of his, Oliver Assayas. They knew each other back before they were anybody. They had been drinking buddies in school and Assayas was there when Bono started his band. They did this long interview and had a great many fascinating insights.

Right in the middle of it, Assayas says, "Man, what happened to you?" with the implication, "You used to be so much fun and you're not any more. What happened to you?" Bono responds, "Well, I started to figure out the difference between karma and grace." Assayas goes, "Karma and grace? That doesn't make anything clearer for me," and Bono says, "You see, at the center of all religions is karma, that is, what you put in, comes back out, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth or as in physics, physical laws that say for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. It is clear to me that karma is at the very heart of the universe. I'm absolutely sure of it." Bono says, "And yet, along comes this idea called grace to overturn all that what-you-reap, you-sow stuff. I believe what you reap, you sow, but grace defies logic. If you like, love interrupts logic. It interrupts the consequences of actions which in my case," says Bono, "is very good news because I've done a lot of really bad stuff."

Assayas goes, "I'd be interested to hear more about that."

Bono says, "That's between me and God, but I'd be in big trouble if karma was going to be my final judge. I'd be in deep doo-doo. It doesn't excuse my mistakes, but I'm holding out for grace. I'm holding out that Jesus took my sins onto the cross because I know who I am, and I hope, I don't have to depend on my own religion."

Assayas, a Frenchman, a skeptic, says, "The Son of God who takes away the sins of the world, huh? I wish I could believe that."

Bono: "I love the idea of the Sacrificial Lamb. I love the idea that God says, 'Look, you cretins, there are results to the way you are, to your selfishness. Your mortality is woven into the very idea of being sinful. Let's face it, you're not living a very good life, are you? There are consequences to your actions.'" Bono says, "The point of the death of Christ is that Christ took on the sins of the world so that what we put out does not come back, and our sins do not reap death. That's the point. It should keep us humbled. It's nothing that we do that gets us through the gates of heaven."

Assayas to his friend: "That's a great idea, no doubt about it. Hope is wonderful even though it's is close to lunacy in my view. Christ has His rank among the world's great thinkers but Son of God? Isn't that farfetched?"

Bono: "No, not to me. Look, the secular response to the Christ story always goes like this: He was a great prophet, obviously a very interesting guy, had a lot to say along the lines of other great prophets, Elijah, Muhammad, Buddha, Confucius. But actually," Bono says, "Christ doesn't allow you to believe that. He doesn't let you off the hook. He says, 'No, I'm not a teacher. Don't call Me a teacher. I'm not saying I'm a prophet. I am the Messiah.' Jesus says, 'I am God incarnate.' And people say, 'No, no, please, just be a prophet. Prophets we can take. You're a little eccentric. We've had John the Baptist eating the locusts and wild honey. We can handle that, but don't mention the Messiah word because, you know, bad things are gonna happen.' Jesus says, 'No, no, I know you're expecting me to come back with an army and set you free from these creeps, but actually I *am* the Messiah.' At that point, everybody in the first century starts looking at their shoes. They say, 'Oh, my God, He's gonna keep saying this.' So what we're left with is either Christ was who He said He was, the Messiah, or He was a nutcase. I mean, we're talking nutcase on the level of Charles Manson."

This is Bono taking. "This man was like some of the people who strapped themselves to a bomb. He has *King of the Jews* tattooed on His forehead and as they are putting Him up on the cross. He is going, 'Okay, here we go. Bring on the pain. I can take it.'" "I'm not joking," Bono says. "The idea that the entire course of civilization for over half the globe could have its fate changed by a nutcase, *that's* farfetched. If we could only be a little bit more like Him, the world would be different. When I look up at the cross," Bono says, "what I see up there is all my doo-doo and everybody else's, so I ask myself a question a lot of people have asked. Who *is* this man and was He who He said He was, or was He just a religious nut? And there it is. That is the question. Who is this man? And nobody can talk you into it, and nobody can talk you out of it." From Dr. Bono: "That's why what you believe about Jesus matters."

Pray with me.

Lord, You've been called a lot of things over the years, and people have had all these wild, different ideas of who You are, and in the midst of that, we live our real lives. We live lives of pain and fear and darkness, and in the dark, we wonder where You are. Amen.

The story starts this way.

¹ In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. ² Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. ³ And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. ⁴ God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. ⁵ God called the light "day," and the darkness he called "night." And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.

But then human beings went their own way, apart from God, and darkness returned to the earth. Over 200 times the Bible talks about darkness, almost always to show separation from each other or from God. People start to talk about longing for the light to come back. The prophets talk about it. Isaiah said,

² The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.

They look for the light but they don't find it. And then it is as if the story starts over. John starts his story just like Genesis.

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was with God in the beginning. ³ Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ⁴ In him was life, and that life was the light of all people. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

Jesus said,

¹²"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

"I've come into the world as light so that no one who believes in me would stay in the darkness." I say that I want that light. I want to live in the light, but do I really? Do you? Because I'm like a lot of people. I'm afraid of the dark. No, I'm not so much afraid of the dark as I am afraid of what's out *in* the dark. I'm afraid of the darkness out there, and I'm afraid of the darkness in here. This is the verdict. Light came into the world, but people loved the dark instead of the light because their deeds were evil.

Darkness is a picture of life apart from God, apart from His direction, apart from His wisdom, apart from His love and care. We have important decisions to make, and we don't know what to do. We are foolish or ignorant or confused. That is darkness. We blunder around and hurt other people. We walk in darkness. We become afraid. We lose hope. Sometimes darkness takes the form of choking off our hearts. Harvard did a study once where they asked students if the prices were the same, which option would they choose:

- Option A: You make \$50,000 a year, and everybody else makes \$25,000 a year, or
- Option B: You make \$100,000 a year, but everybody else makes \$200,000 a year.

Which option do you think most people who were Harvard's brightest chose? Option A. That's the human heart. The majority of them said they were willing to take a 50 percent pay cut in order to feel superior to others, in order to get other people to envy them. We walk in darkness.

This week I told Laura I would wait for her for something. Then I didn't wait. I got nervous about being late and looking bad, and I went downtown. She sends me a text message saying, "I'm really disappointed that you didn't ask." The interesting thing is not that I messed up. It's how I responded to her text message. It was not pretty. I thought later, "That's lame. Wasn't there something I could have said that would have been better?" A little voice, you know that little voice, that little voice inside me, it said, "You could have said, 'You know, honey, I was preoccupied and uncaring. Please forgive me.'" And I said to the little voice, "Okay, okay. But next time, talk sooner, would you?"

I play golf every year with my brothers. It's a blood sport. A couple of years ago we were playing and I looked over at my brother in the rough, and I see him nudge his ball into a better spot. I am in the middle of the swamp inside of the trees far from the fairway. I address my ball, and I give it a little nudge because he did it. I hit a titanic shot onto the green, out of the swamp. I walk out into the fairway to strut up to the green, and another brother turns to me and goes, "How'd you hit that ball out of there?" I may have snapped back, "I did not move it!" My brothers have been watching me talk about God for decades. That same little voice said, "You know, you could say, 'Sorry I did it. I acted like a chicken.'" And you know what I thought? I've got to stop listening to that little voice. It's driving me crazy.

This is the verdict. Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of the light because their deeds were evil, and yet we hunger for the light, don't we? We hunger for it even when it makes us feel uncomfortable. The darkness is scary, and we have a sense that the darkness leads to bad places. God said, "Let there be light." Jesus said, "I am the light of the world." In Matthew 5 when Jesus spoke to the people who were going to follow Him, He said,

¹⁴ "You are the light of the world.

I don't want to talk about the light of the world and have you feel like the lights are on but our eyes are still closed. I want to believe that the light gets in. I think when Jesus says, "I am the light of the world," He offers light for the heart. The apostle Paul says in Ephesians,

¹⁸ I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened....

I used to teach that the verse in Matthew where Jesus says "You are the light of the world" was because when Jesus comes, He is so filled with light and so brilliant that when we turn to Him that we get the reflected glory. I said, "It is like Jesus is the sun and we are the moon." The moon has got nothing. The moon is dark, but when the sun shines on the moon, it glows. I said, "That's like God. Jesus is the sun. We are the moon."

In the Book of Exodus, Moses climbs to the top of the mountain and asks God for help. He begs God to come so that he will know that God is real, and God says, "You can't look at me, but I will pass by." God passes close by, and Moses sees the presence of God, and his face shines like the sun. It says that his face is so bright, when he goes back down the mountain, everybody is freaking out, scared of him, so he puts a veil over his face because this glow, this holy glow, is scaring people.

“You are the light of the world,” but you know what happened? You don’t want to hear this part in the Old Testament but in the New Testament in the Book of Hebrews, it says that, after a while, the glow faded but Moses kept on the veil so people would not see. I think there are a whole lot of us wearing veils, coming to church and hearing about the light of the world with no light in sight. Nowadays when I hear Jesus say, “I am the light of the world,” and “You are the light of the world,” I get another image, also from the apostle Paul. It’s from 2nd Corinthians, chapter 4. He says,

⁵ For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake. ⁶ For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God’s glory displayed in the face of Christ. ⁷ But we have this treasure in jars of clay....

jars of clay that break . . . to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.

Jesus comes to us as the light of the world, not with superpower but with grace so we are never alone. We are never condemned. Jesus is close. He is inside us through His spirit, and God’s love doesn’t shine out through my strength but through the cracks in my heart. We become the beloved children of God because God’s light is in our hearts not because we are better. “I am the light of the world,” Jesus said. “Get it in your heart.” Christ changes our hearts so we are the beloved children but that’s only the beginning. Christ also enlightens our eyes so that we see the world differently. I love C. S. Lewis. He says this.

A person can no more diminish God’s glory by refusing to worship Him than a lunatic puts out the sun by scribbling the word *darkness* on the walls of his cell.... I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it but because by it, I see everything else....

Jesus said, “I am the light of the world,” and that light changes the way we look at the world. Once you see Jesus, things of great value start to lose their hold on you. For some of us, it is riches. For some of us, youth. For some of us, looks, and for some of us, it is grudges. The world is obsessed with that, but there is not much light there. The light of Christ changes the plans you have to be successful or good looking and gives you another agenda. Perhaps for me, most of all the light of Jesus changes the way that I look at the world in the people that bug me so very, very much because I begin to see those people in the light of Christ. C. S. Lewis again,

You have never met a mere human being. They are either someone becoming a person who will look like God or becoming someone who will look like the devil.

“You’ve never met a mere human being.” Has God changed your eyesight lately? Or do you still live in the shadows? Do you still prefer the dark because then you can think badly of other people and not see them the way that Jesus does? If Christ is the light of the world, He gives us light for the heart, light for the eyes, but I’ve got to tell you, Jesus is not going to be satisfied until there is light for the hands. People who believe but don’t follow. People who do nothing. They are hiding their light, but people who follow Jesus have light for their hands to do the work of the King because, you see, now with that light that affects your eyes, you see things that nobody else sees.

You are supposed to see the children of God and not enemies. You are supposed to have a vision of the people you see right on your doorstep, what God sees, what could be, and God will give you tasks and hope, hope for the future instead of despair. We will have eyes to see the lost and the least and the left behind right around us, and Jesus will put His light into your hands. Paul says to the church of Corinth, "Now we see but dimly," like through a cracked mirror, through the gloom, but at the end, we will see face to face, and then we will see Him, and He will see us. Will you and I see the light of the world so that we can be the light of the world? Or will we live in the shadows?

Lord Jesus, I thank You so much that You did not stand far off, that You did not shine that mega flashlight into our eyes so that we became scared of You, but that Your light brought life and grace and love to us that You would have us share with others. When You said, "I am the light of the world," You told us to come to the light so that the ugly, little, petty things in our hearts, in our eyes, and in our hands would be washed clean by Your light, and Your glory would shine through the cracks of our hearts. In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Spirit, we pray for light. 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.