

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
April 29 & 30, 2017
John Crosby
Jesus Sounds Good But. . . There Can't Be Only One Way to God
John 14:6**

God, I thank You so much for the voices of freshman in high school who are on this journey of faith who look into the Bible, sometimes for the first time, and read things like, "The grass withers and the flowers perish, but the word of the Lord stands forever" and the Psalm that says, "May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be pleasing to You, our God." Amen.

So, we're on this journey of life and faith saying Jesus sounds good, but . . . and it's normal, it's even important to have questions and doubts on the journey. That's how your faith grows! It comes to new places and of course there's one important question whenever you're on a journey, which is: am I going the right way? Now, men have no problems with this. We're quick to stop and ask for directions, or ask our spouse or our kids, *am I going the right way?* But for the women and the kids we need to ask, am I going the right way? That's what happens here today out of the story in the Scriptures . . . somebody turns and asks Jesus about the way, and as is often the case, Jesus gives them an answer that surprises them. Jesus usually gives answers that go across the grain: lose your life and you'll save it, the last will be first, the meek will inherit the earth, rejoice in persecution, pray for your enemies, it's better to give than to receive, turn the other cheek, don't get revenge. Those are all counter to our culture, but maybe the most politically incorrect answer that Jesus ever gave was in John 14 when his friend Thomas, an apostle, asks a question.

⁵ Thomas said to him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going (this is right near His crucifixion), so how can we know the way?" ⁶ Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."
[John 14:5-6]

That was a problem back then and it's been a problem ever since. Now, when Jesus said that He was the way, the truth, and the life, He almost certainly was not answering a question about whether Buddhists and Hindus go to hell or not. He was reassuring Thomas that he was on the right path and that he needed to follow Jesus, but the early church started to say *well, there are all kinds of religions around us, is there something different about Christianity that makes it the ONLY way? Was Jesus right when He said, "No one comes to the Father but through Me"?* And so the apostle Peter, in the book of Acts, turns to a bunch of people and he says, "Yes, there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven by which we must be saved." The apostle Paul turns to his protégé Timothy and says, "There is one God and one mediator between God and humanity, the man Christ Jesus." And John, an old man, turns around and

says, “This is our testimony. [This is our story and we’re sticking to it] This is our testimony: that God has given us eternal life and this life is in His son. The one who has the Son has life. The one who does not have the son of God does not have life.” Some will come to the Son and have life and others will not and will not have life. That has always been hard for Christians to believe and to say in the middle of a very complex world. And never more than in the last couple centuries when people think, *we’re too sophisticated for that. There are all different ways to God. How can you be so parochial to think that?* We have just asked these freshman in high school to say that they believe Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. What does that mean for them?

If you struggle with this or if you believe it sort of . . . *yeah, I believe Jesus is the way, but I don’t know how I’d explain it*, welcome to the club. It’s a challenge, but you need to face it. There’s a great book by Tim Keller. It’s called *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* and this is one of the issues he addresses. He uses a woman named Blair, 24-years-old, living in Manhattan, and she writes to Keller and says, “I think it’s arrogant and exclusive to say that your religion is superior, to try to convert everybody else to it. Surely, all the religions of the world are equally good and valid for meeting the needs of their particular followers.” How do you answer that? What she is saying is, Jesus sounds good, but all religions are the same, aren’t they? You have your truth, I have my truth. Christians are narrow-minded and snobbish when they say that Jesus is the only way, so how do you answer that? Well, you have to think about it because it sounds so reasonable, but the reality is, we don’t think that all religions are equal, do we? I don’t think you would even after one sentence. For example, you and I would agree that the Branch Davidian cult, or ISIS, or the IRA are not the same as or equal to being a Buddhist, or a Muslim, or a Jew. You’re already making judgements in what people believe.

Second, if you look at different religions of the world, some would say, *oh they all teach basically the same thing. We all end up in the same place. There is a lot in common. All the religions of the world teach about how to treat each other.* Well, they have moral values and systems, but they are quite different. For instance, there are claims that this religion makes that are totally opposite with this and they cannot both be true. Buddhists, wonderful people, Buddhists would say they don’t believe in a creator God—there is not one God. In that, they are very different than the Muslim, or the Christian, or the Jew who says there is one God. At that point, either the Buddhists are right or we’re right, but both can’t be right—they are mutually exclusive. Atheism is a religion. It’s the religion that says there cannot be a God and therefore anybody who believes in God is wrong. It’s exclusive. No religion states, “Come join us, but keep your different beliefs.” By its nature religion is about beliefs that set it apart, so all religions are not the same. But the biggest difference between all these other religions and Christianity is not that we don’t all end up at the same place, it’s that we all start at a very different place. The other religions are founded by great men or women who either see a truth or have a vision and it points them toward God. The Buddha tried to discover the meaning of life.

Mohammed felt like he had a vision from God. Confucius tried to make sense of how people should live. Christianity is completely different. This is not a man who points to God, this is a man who claims to BE God. "I am the way, the truth, the life." In another part, "I and the Father are one. The one who has seen Me has seen the Father." This is not a person pointing to God; this is a person claiming to be God. You either believe that's true or you call for the people in the white coats. Somebody comes up to you at Lunds and says, "I'm God, would you mind giving me a \$20 bill?" You have a choice to make. That's the biggest difference.

Religion is the attempts of people to reach God. Christianity says that it's about God coming to us. So, all religions believe that there is something wrong in the world, right? That there's something wrong inside human beings, that there's evil loose in the world and to deal with it by developing laws, or paths, or truths that their followers will use to fix their lives so they will get to God. To fix their lives so they will improve the world around us. Some of these religions use a prayer wheel, others go on pilgrimages, some give alms to the poor, other religions avoid eating certain foods, or praying a specific way, or going through a series of reincarnations. Some would say there are laws embedded in the universe that point to our God. Jews and Christians would say that; we would call it the Ten Commandments.

This is not a trick quiz, but who would agree that the Ten Commandments are part of God's pattern for a good life? Okay, almost all of you. Really, it's not a trick question. How many of you would say you never ever told a lie? No stretching the truth? Or exaggerated? No. So one of the things we would say is that we've already broken one of the Ten Commandments, "Thou shall not lie." We're all liars. Okay, how many of you would say that you have never stolen anything? A quarter of you. Okay, this is better than the other crowds, this is good. All of you have admitted that you're liars and some of you are lying about having been thieves, but we're all in this together.

When we reflect, we would agree that part of the problem with the world is us. We want to do the right thing, and often we end up not doing it. But most of us—Christians or not—most of us would like to think that we're going to be okay because God, if there is a God, is good and loving and He will overlook our sins mostly because we're not so bad compared to them. You always have to have in your back pocket a "compared to them." The kid who gossips all the time, the person with multiple murders, the rapist, the terrorist—*compared to them I'm almost a saint, right?* If God is good He'll let us in. If God loves us He won't judge us, will He? Think about that for a minute. If you love somebody, do you discipline them, do you punish them, do you judge their behavior? I'm afraid that it's because God loves you that there *will* be judgement and there *will* be discipline. Think about it as a parent, or somebody who is seeing kids up close. How would it work if a 5-year-old could do absolutely anything they wanted and not be punished for it because their parents love them so much? I love you, you can do anything that you want. If you overlook sin, if you do not punish and discipline because

you love them, you create a world that is filled with chaos and a world that is populated with little monsters who think that the world revolves around them and the only good is what they want. So, let's ask again. If God loves you, do you really think He will overlook your particular sin or does He have to discipline, punish, judge it? Is that the kind of God you really want? A God that lets you get away with things with the rationale being, *Oh, he's not as bad as the person behind him?* There has to be a sense of judgment.

Here's one of the key differences between Christianity and the other world religions. The other world religions will say that *it is this belief system, obeying these laws and this moral code that will satisfy God, so join my religion.* Christianity says *none of that works.* I cannot try hard enough, think good enough, act well enough. I cannot do it. Christianity says *I am not a belief system. I am God coming to rescue.* Christianity says that God leaves heaven and comes to us to show us how to live and to rescue us; to allow us to be forgiven and touched by God with grace and love. We cannot do it for ourselves. We can't get out of the pit. Someone has to come down for us.

One of my friends uses an example of being out to dinner with 20 people. You said you'd take them all out, but when the check comes, it has two extra zeros in it. You're toast. There's no possible way you can pay this check. You're fumbling around in your wallet and looking around...is there anybody here I can ask to split the bill? I'm so toast. But then the waiter comes back and says, "I forgot to tell you, sir. A person paid your bill as they left. They said they know you and they love you and they just want you to know this is what grace feels like." And you're going, oohhhh. That is grace. Not something you can do—something Christ has done for you.

So, that first question: Are all religions alike, and do they end up in the same place? It's not being judgmental to say *no, they aren't alike. They end up in different places.* It's not unreasonable to say that, but the second claim, the second part of that where the young girl said, "Christians are so narrow-minded and snobbish when they say that Jesus is the only way to heaven." What would you say to that?" And I'd say, "Guilty!" Christians are jerks. Christians can come across as judgmental. Throughout history Christians have said, "We have the way to the truth. We're gonna fly and you're gonna fry." And there is a sense that somehow we are superior and that turns people off left and right. But really it's not so much about are Christians narrow-minded? It's more like: is there only one way? Is God fair? That sounds so unfair, but think of it this way . . . is it fair to have one way? Or is it fair to say, "We'll set up a way to God over here, and we'll set up a way to God on the other side of the planet, and we'll let them fight it out because they are opposite ways and they both can't be true." That seems more unfair to me.

Let me give you an analogy that's been helpful to many of us. I am friends with a couple. They're parents and they have a little girl. She's about five and she developed a

little tumor on her arm—a bump that got bigger and bigger, so they took her to the doctor and said, “Well, what do you think? She’s had these before and they come up and they go away.” The doctor looks and says, “Well, I’m sorry. It’s a tumor and it’s growing very rapidly and before we can even know about chemo or radiation we just have to take the tumor out.” And the parents ask for a second opinion and the second opinion comes back the same way—it’s a rapidly growing tumor. And the parents are just desperate. They don’t want to submit their child to this and so they say, “How about this . . . we’ll just ignore it. The other bumps have gone away and this will go away too, okay?” No. “That won’t work? Well I tell you what, I hear that exercise, if she gets her arm big enough, that will work, okay?” No. “But I understand that there’s a new bleach—if you pour the bleach on top of the arm and rub it real hard it will go away.” No. That won’t work either. “Well, what if we talk about sending her to a special school? Doc, I know you think the tumor is truth, but that’s your truth, that’s not my truth. If we sincerely believe that this cream that we’re pouring on the bump will make it go away, that will work out for the best, won’t it?” Of course not...any more than eating dirt. If you said eating dirt is the answer, you have the right to your opinion, but that doesn’t stop the tumor from growing. Are parents narrow-minded; are we narrow-minded to accept the cure as the only way to go? No. They’re not narrow-minded, they’re acting rationally with the evidence that they have before them. What you need to do is to look at the evidence that Jesus produces about who He is and say, “Is this the way to treat the tumor of my sin?”

That ties back to this idea of Christians being snobs. The second book I’d offer you is by a guy called Lee Strobel. Strobel was an Atheist himself and he wrote *The Case for Christ*. In it he says, “Christians should be anything but snobby.” He said, “Imagine a town that had two country clubs. (John repeats “Imagine a town that had two country clubs” and the congregation starts laughing). The first club only admits people who have earned their membership. To get in you need to maintain superior wisdom, fill a list of demands, and have certain spiritual requirements. Despite your best efforts, a lot of people just won’t make the grade and they will be excluded. That’s in many ways what other religions say, teaching people that they have to work their way to God. But the second country club says that anybody who wants to can come in because Jesus already paid the membership price—rich or poor, gay or straight, black or white. They say that regardless of your heritage, they would love to have you come in. But remember, entrance is not based on how hard you try or your qualifications, it’s only by presenting the invitation that Jesus has made to you.”

I’m with the Jesus party. I have trusted to Jesus that people of that club say, “We’ll leave it up to you. It’s really your decision, but remember, we’ll never turn you away.” That’s how I think Christians are to avoid being perceived as snobs. We are just beggars who have found a loaf of bread, telling other people where the bread is.

So, this goes on, okay? That sounds pretty good, but you guys are being led by seniors in high school, right? The seniors in high school are going to go off to college next year,

and halfway through the second semester of college they're going to be in a dorm room one night and they're going to have one pizza too many. Their friends—not them—their friends will have one beer too many and the talk will turn to this and somebody will say *yeah, yeah, but what about all those people who live somewhere where they never heard about Jesus, are they going to hell? What's going to happen to them?* That's another sermon, come back next week.

I think though, what we need to say is that Jesus makes pretty clear that all who seek will find. All who knock will have the door opened. That God wants everyone to be saved. There is no trap door. He wants everyone to be saved, and He has Jesus to show that God is not fair. Thank God that God is not fair. Fair puts me in a lot of trouble. You need grace. That kind of God can be trusted to answer that kind of question. So, parents and friends, eighty-four percent of Americans are convinced that Jesus is the son of God. That's a great first step, but if you've never acted on that, if you have never put your trust in Jesus to rescue you from being just a good religious person, ask Him to lead you to safety and a new life. I would urge you to do it once and for all before your head hits the pillow tonight. Be sure to tell God that that's the desire of your heart. You're tired of the doing. You need Jesus to have it done.

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.