

QUESTION #18: “WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN ATHEIST?” (Luke 6:46-49)

9.22.19

INTRODUCTION

I mentioned last week that, as of Thursday, September 5, I had been in this church, with family of believers, for a year. So, maybe as a natural consequence of that (and I absolutely love history), I decided to look back on the messages, or at least the themes, that we have looked at over this year.

Since September 2018 (not counting holiday messages), we have talked about:

- Affirming who the Bible says Jesus is
- Staying connected with Jesus
- Reflecting the character of Jesus
- Serving each other like Jesus
- What it means to be the “body of Christ”
- What it means to love like Christ
- What it means to forgive like Christ
- The importance of three little words: “I was wrong”
- What does unity look like?
- What does prayer look like?

We also talked the fruits of the Spirit: Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

And, since the first Sunday in May, we have been looking at what we have called “The Big Questions”: questions that the members and friends of this particular church family have about Jesus Christ and the faith he came to proclaim. In this series (still ongoing), we have talked about:

- Is once saved always saved?
- Would a loving God send someone to hell?
- Is Jesus the only way to heaven?
- Aren't all religions the same?
- If God knows all things, why do we need to pray?
- What is hell?
- How can an all-powerful God allow pain and suffering?
- Was Jesus really tempted by Satan in the wilderness?
- What happens to someone who dies never having heard about Jesus?
- Why do we do church?
- If baptism doesn't save us, why is it necessary?
- What is the unpardonable sin?
- Keeping God holy — what is swearing?
- What is joy?
- God, the gospel . . . and trees (what do trees have to do with God and the gospel)?
- How near is death (where we talked about near-death experiences)?
- What does the Bible say about socialism?

All of these varied, multifaceted topics have one thing in common: They are all a part of this faith journey we call Christianity. And I think we'll see as we get into today's topic that all these

past conversations in many ways strike at the core of what we will be addressing today — a question that seems to make no sense when you initially hear it, but that we are going to find is much, much more than a silly oxymoron: What is a Christian atheist? So let's begin!

TEXT (harmonized with Matthew 7:24-27)

“Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say? As for everyone who comes to me and hears my words and puts them into practice, I will show you what they are like. They are like a [wise — Matthew 7:24b] man building a house, who dug down deep and laid the foundation on rock. [The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house — Matthew 7:25a] When a flood came, the torrent struck that house but could not shake it [it did not fall — Matthew 7:25b], because it was well built [it had its foundation on the rock — Matthew 7:25b]. But the one [everyone — Matthew 7:26a] who hears my words and does not put them into practice is like a [foolish — Matthew 7:26b] man who built a house [on sand — Matthew 7:26b] on the ground without a foundation. [The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew against that house — Matthew 7:27a] The moment the torrent struck that house, it collapsed [it fell with a great crash — Matthew 7:27b] and its destruction was complete” — Jesus Christ, Luke 6:46-49.

Now to really get a good handle of this story, we need to look at the context, which takes us back to these verses beginning at Luke 6:17: *[Jesus] went down with [the disciples] and stood on a level place. A large crowd of his disciples was there and a great number of people from all over Judea, from Jerusalem, and from the coastal region around Tyre and Sidon, who had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. Those troubled by impure spirits were cured, and the people all tried to touch him, because power was coming from him and healing them all — Luke 6:17-19.*

Now Jesus is talking to two groups of people here: first, those who are already following him — meaning his teachings for sure, but also literally, physically following him (including the newly appointed 12 apostles) — and “a great number of people” from, literally, all over the place, walking many, many miles. Just using Capernaum as a possible area where this teaching and healing took place, people would be traveling as much as 35 miles (from Tyre) and 50 miles (from Sidon) to approximately 85 miles (if traveling from Jerusalem) — many hours of walking some very rugged, rocky terrain. But it was worth it — potential guaranteed healing from Jesus of Nazareth awaited them.

But so did teaching. Jesus was here for far more than simply putting on a show or making people feel good. He was the ambassador of a kingdom — God's kingdom — which he was committed to presenting to everyone he could. The healings emphasized his power — the same power that was found in his words.

Now some people had already committed themselves to following the teachings they were hearing. And some people were undoubtedly attracted and interested in what he was saying. But some only saw him as a means for healing, for finally being rescued from whatever malady with which they were dealing. Their attraction was based more on a self-serving, even selfish, “What can he do for me?” How they saw Jesus Christ was defined by what Jesus could do for them in the moment — healing a pain, curing an illness, erasing a disability, filling a belly. Jesus offered so much more.

Now Jesus truly had compassion for the people who came to him; as Matthew noted of him: ***When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd — Matthew 9:36.*** But Jesus was here for more — for so much more — than simply the healing of a moment. But he also was not fooled by whatever praise would come his way from those whom he had touched in such an amazing and personal way by ridding their lives of their ailments; as the apostle John would later write, in the wake of many people seeing the miracles he did and, as result, believing in him: ***Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all people. He did not need any testimony about mankind, for he knew what was in each person — John 2:24.*** This was confirmed following the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand, when Jesus had left that crowd's presence, but then they went searching for him, eventually finding him on the opposite side of the Sea of Galilee from where they had been fed. When they finally caught up to him, Jesus told them: ***“[Y]ou are looking for me, not because you saw the signs I performed but because you ate the loaves and had your fill” — Jesus Christ, John 6:26.*** He then went on to explain what needs to be their (and our) priority: ***“Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you” — Jesus Christ, John 6:27a.*** That food is his teaching, and that is where “Christian atheism” can be found.

So what exactly is Christian atheism? A good definition would be: Believing in God but living as if he doesn't exist. It may be in one area of our lives, or in several. But the bottom line is the same: We live out some parts of our lives as if there is no God; therefore, it's all on us, the burden to act and resolve is on us — I need to fix this, I need to figure this out, I need to decide what's right. It has to be about us, because God really doesn't exist, at least not in the way we live in some of those areas. We give God no place — nothing for him to fix, nothing for him to figure out, no opportunity for him to decide what's right. Nothing for him to rule over, nothing that let's his will be done because, in the context of the Christian atheist, he doesn't exist in that part of our life anyway.

But maybe another way to look at it is this: Does the God we say we believe in match the God the Bible presents? In other words, how would somebody describe the God we say we worship and follow and live for by watching our actions? Does THAT God match the God the Bible presents?

That's a really profound, even troubling, question for, if I'm pledging allegiance, if I'm surrendering my life to a God that, by the actions of my life, doesn't really exist, that's a problem. And If the God a church proclaims and sings about and prays to doesn't match the God found in the Scriptures, that church is going to have some issues.

That's part of the point Christ is making right in the first words of this section of Scripture: ***“Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say?” — Jesus Christ, Luke 6:46.*** This was not a new question. Some four hundred years before Jesus' time, the prophet Malachi had recorded God asking much the same question: ***“A son honors his father, and a slave his master. If I am a father, where is the honor due me? If I am a master, where is the respect due me?” — God speaking, Malachi 1:6.*** Essentially both Scriptures are saying the same thing: “You call me your Ruler, but then you don't let me rule.” And his ruling over us comes from what we do with the words he has given us. And therein lies the problem — and the choice: Are we going to, as the wise man did in the parable, build our lives on the foundation of the word of God — including all the teachings and examples that Christ gave us — or are we going to, like the foolish

man, build our lives on, essentially, nothing? Are we, to paraphrase James 1:22, going to be doers of the word or hearers only? That really clarifies the two, and only two, options: Either building our lives on the rock that is God — His word, His Son, his truth — or build it on ourselves, living, as our message title suggests today, a Christian atheist.

So let's look at some background to see where this idea comes from:

- 1) As Christians, we say that we love God. But how does the Bible define that love? What does it look like when we say, "I love you, Lord?" Both the Old and New Testaments make clear what loving God looks like: obedience.
 - a) In the OT: ***"[W]hat does the Lord your God ask of you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the Lord's commands and decrees" — Moses, Deuteronomy 10:12-13a.*** In fact, the Old Testament goes out of its way to tell us how important obedience is in any relationship with God. When King Saul disobeyed God by sparing the livestock of the Amalekites after Samuel had communicated God's command that all the Amalekites and their livestock be destroyed for their sins against Israel, Samuel confronted him with these words: ***"Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams — Samuel, speaking to Saul, I Samuel 15:22.*** Translation: I don't want your religion; I want your relationship. For God, relationship is all about obedience.
 - b) In the NT: ***"If you love me, keep my commands. . . . As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. The result? I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete" — Jesus Christ, John 14:15, 15:9-11.***
 - c) But the great part of obedience? The joy that it brings both to God and to his kids:
 - i) ***The Lord makes firm the steps of the one who delights in him, though he may stumble, he will not fall, for the Lord upholds him with his hand — David, Psalm 37:23-24.***
 - ii) ***[God's] pleasure is not in the strength of the horse, nor his delight in the legs of the warrior; the Lord delights in those who fear him, who put their hope in his unfailing love — Psalm 147:10-11.***
- 2) As Christians, we say that we serve God. Yes, the Bible says that we serve God but, even more than that, particularly as described in the NT, we are slaves to God.
 - a) When Moses said to the Israelites: ***Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength — Moses, Deuteronomy 6:5,*** he is translating love as an all-encompassing allegiance that commands the entire personality. We are surrendering everything we got; we are God's slaves.
 - b) Paul says as much in his letter to the Romans, telling them that, as Christians: ***[Y]ou have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God — Paul, Romans 6:22a.*** As Peter affirmed: ***Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God's slaves — I Peter 2:16.*** And as Paul said so simply to the Colossian church: ***[Y]ou also have a Master in heaven — Paul, Colossians 4:1b.***

- c) And what is the basis for that relationship? Paul spells it out very plainly with words we have heard before: ***You are not your own; you were bought at a price — Paul, I Corinthians 6:19b-20a.***

APPLICATION

So let's return to the original questions: Do we believe in God but live as if he doesn't exist? Does the God we say we believe in match the Bible of the Scriptures? Let's look at some areas that are often lived as if God doesn't exist, to understand what this actually looks like:

Forgiveness. OK; somebody hurts us. We don't think we deserved it, we certainly don't think it was fair, but it happened. This side of heaven, that's always going to happen. It's a fallen world, and hurts are inevitable. But as a result of our particular hurt, we feel anger, resentment, bitterness and a whole cluster of other ugly things against that person. A Christian atheist wraps themselves in that hurt, and the idea of forgiving that person for that wrong is out of the question. That person is in that moment living as if God does not exist. In fact, in talking with people in that situation, I have often heard words saying something like, "Well, if you knew what they did, if you knew what they said, then you'd understand how I feel." Do you really want to tell me that God somehow DOESN'T know what happened, that he doesn't know what was done or said? All of a sudden, God is looking awfully invisible, like he ain't even around. That's Christian atheism.

Now, if God truly did exist, they would be aware of what the Bible says about such moments and, in fact, they would be actively seeking God's word for guidance, realizing that what determines their behavior is not supposed to be their view of their situation, but God their Master's view of their situation. And God's word would tell them, as the author of Hebrews said: ***See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many — Hebrews 12:15.*** You see, roots absorb and store; that's what roots do to feed the plant. Well, a root of bitterness will absorb and store up hurt and anger and hatred and thoughts of revenge, and feed all that poison into our hearts and minds. Remember Paul's love chapter of I Corinthians 13? In that amazing set of verses, Paul wrote that love ***keeps no record of wrongs — Paul, I Corinthians 13:5b.*** A root of bitterness, on the other hand, keeps detailed records. Gotta keep that bitterness alive and growing, right? So how to kill that root? Paul gives us the answer at the end of Ephesians 4: ***Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you — Paul, Ephesians 4:31-32.*** In other words, we do to others what in Christ God did for us. Who should understand forgiveness more than a Christian? We of all people should be able to know and appreciate the extreme price Jesus paid that we could experience that forgiveness. And speaking of Jesus, please don't ever think that your hurt, your betrayal, whatever it is, is somehow worse than what he dealt with while he was walking around down here. And yet what example did he leave us — that is, if we should choose his way over ours? Peter tells us: ***When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly — I Peter 2:23.*** You think you've been treated unfairly? Take a look at Jesus and then get back to me. So how can we choose to withhold that same kind of blessing of forgiveness from somebody else that Jesus extended to us? Easy — act like God doesn't exist. That makes you judge, jury and executioner. Excuse me if I have a hard time finding God's love in that scenario. The fact is, it is AS impossible for me to find forgiveness for somebody who has hurt me as it is for me to please God on my own. The only way I can forgive is to be surrendered to God, living out the same

words that Christ did, no matter how difficult the circumstances: “[N]ot my will, but yours be done” — *Jesus Christ, Luke 22:42b*. In other words, Master say, slave do! And I can only do by the power of a God that exists!

Worry. I once read a great definition of worry: “The sin of distrusting the promises and the power of God.” How can that happen? Easy — have no God. Be a Christian atheist. Believe in God but, when it comes to the burdens and challenges of life, I’m on my own. But the problem is that worry is a sin; as Paul said it: *[E]verything that does not come from faith is sin*” — *Paul, Romans 14:23b*. Why is worry a sin? It is the opposite of faith. When we live by faith, we are saying that God has everything under control. When our minds begin to move our focus from God to some of life’s more difficult moments — losing a job, dealing with a difficult illness, family troubles — we are allowing Satan, the father of lies as Jesus called him, to impact and even direct our thinking. Fear and worry and anxiety don’t come from God; they are headaches from Satan. God offers something entirely different: *[T]he Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline* — *Paul, II Timothy 1:7*.

So why do we worry? It’s largely a control issue. One of the great lies that Satan has advertised is that we can control our own circumstances. In some areas, that might be possible but, in many areas, there’s simply no way. And worry tells a story that says we’re not willing to let God handle things — not in his way, not in his time, not in his strength, not in his love. Live like God doesn’t exist and that’s the life you’re saddled with. On the other hand, if you want a life less burdened by life’s anxieties, every time you begin to worry, consider that an internal “trumpet call” to pray. Prayer is one of God’s great blessings for our lives. It basically is a transfer of ownership. It is our saying, “God, please take this care, this responsibility, this headache, away from me. I can’t deal with it.” It is a way of embracing the helplessness that comes from realizing, as Jesus said: *[A]part from me you can do nothing*” — *Jesus Christ, John 15:5b*. But be warned: In so doing, you will be challenging yourself to answer a very daunting question: Do I truly believe that God can do all he promises? Do I truly believe God can provide all my needs? Do I truly believe that God can handle this problem, this issue — and that he doesn’t need me for even the slightest bit of help? That answer will be a pretty accurate reflection of whether, in the area of worry, you are living as a Christian atheist — as if God doesn’t exist.

Outreach. One of the largest groups of “Christian atheists” are people who believe in God but won’t be caught dead sharing their faith about him. There can be several reasons for this, and one is the idea that our society considers it rude to be pushy about stuff you believe in. Of course, our society also considers all religions to be the same and, therefore, there is no reason to be pushy. Yet some Christians continue to push their beliefs — sometimes very inappropriately. Several years ago, in a book called *The Day America Told The Truth*, Americans were asked to rank different professions according to their perceived levels of integrity and honesty. Televangelists, those preachers we see on TV, wound up being ranked below lawyers, politicians, car salesmen and even prostitutes. OUCH! The book ranked 73 different professions; only organized crime members and drug dealers ranked lower in this survey than did television evangelists.

And many Christians decide to leave this part of their Christianity out of the “job description.” They believe in God but, when it comes to telling other people what they believe in God and how much they need God in their own lives — poof! — all of a sudden God disappears, replaced by the easier lifestyle of NOT talking about Jesus Christ. One factor in this may be a lack of urgency. After all, while about 75% of Americans surveyed believe in heaven, less than half

believe in hell. The Bible preaches both, but the urgency to reach out to give people the information and opportunity to avoid an eternal hell doesn't seem to move us. That begs the questions: When was the last time you lost track of time because you were so deep in prayer for a lost friend or family member or co-worker? When was the last time our church devoted itself exclusively to praying for the lost? They are out there, so what are we waiting for? Isn't this what God continues to keep us on the planet for, to be ambassadors for his kingdom?

Pastor Craig Groeschel tells the story of an 82-year-old man who lay dying in the local hospital. Craig went to visit him but wanted to keep the conversation kind of lightweight while he waited for a good opportunity to pivot the conversation into spiritual matters. That moment never came on his visit; they talked about pro football and a baseball-playing grandson and the unseasonably hot weather — everything except something that he felt comfortable turning into a spiritual discussion. He left the guy in the hospital room, planning to return the next day to talk to him about his need for Christ. He returned the next day to see the guy surrounded by his family. The guy had passed away moments before Craig had returned. Craig never had that “next” opportunity.

And Billy Graham told the story of being in the company of President John F. Kennedy, riding with the President in his limo. President Kennedy directed the driver to bring Mr. Graham to the hotel where he was staying. Just as Billy Graham was exiting the car, President Kennedy called to him, asking him if they could talk about something else. Mr. Graham was fighting a cold and feeling worn out from the battle, so he asked if it would be possible to get together another time. The next time they were in each other's company, they would talk. The President smiled in an understanding way, wished him well, and left. That was in the fall of 1963. In November of that year, President Kennedy was killed by an assassin's bullets. Billy Graham never got the opportunity to have that “next” conversation. But if we believe in God but live as if he doesn't exist, then sharing the gospel doesn't matter. Is that how we feel about the unsaved around us? Do they matter, or don't they?

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, this all boils down to one simple question: What are we doing, how are we living our lives, to translate the God of the Bible to the world — or are we content to be Christian atheists? It's a critical question. I love you guys. And because I love you guys, we need to talk about these things. Think of it this way: Would we consider ourselves married if our lifestyle never changed? We made our vows, exchanged our rings, but kept dating other people? Anybody watching us would think we're crazy and, in fact, would be absolutely right to confront us with, “If you still want to be dating, why did you ever get married in the first place?”

The implication: Why claim Christ if he is only going to be your master in some of your life? That is even more absurd because there are eternal consequences involved. But sometimes it is easier in these areas to go it alone. Why? They are visible — and very often God seems very invisible. It's understandable: I can see the idiot (my view) who hurt me. I can see the circumstances that cause me worry. I can turn my head (physically and spiritually) away from people who need to hear the gospel. But what was it that Paul reminded us? *[W]e fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal — Paul, II Corinthians 4:18.*

So what can we do to ensure that Christian atheism doesn't creep into our lives? It all revolves around staying connected with God.

- 1) Prayer. Paul said it this way: ***Pray without ceasing — Paul, I Thessalonians 5:17 (NKJV)***. Talk to God about everything. What is one feature about the closest friendships we have in this world? They are the people we have the most conversation with. You want God to be more visible? Talk to him — all the time! How can we claim God when we don't talk to him?
- 2) God's word. The psalmist said it so well: ***I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you. . . . Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light for my path — Psalm 119:11, 105***. Wrapping ourselves in God's word lets us know everything about him — including his power, his promises, his presence. How can we claim God when we avoid learning everything we can about him?
- 3) Church. There is incredible aid to staying connected with God by staying connected to a godly church family. Their "Jesus" stories, their testimonies, their witness, their prayers, all can keep us connected to God as we see the evidence of God's presence and purpose in other people's lives. As the author of Hebrews said: ***[L]et us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another — Hebrews 10:24-25a***.

Bottom line is this: Our hearts should not simply be desiring God's gifts, but rather God's presence. Is the greatest desire of our lives simply to be with him, in every way possible? Go back to the marriage idea. Linda and I have been married 38 years. In that time we've celebrated a whole bunch of birthdays and anniversaries and Christmases. But you know what's the truth? My greatest times have not been receiving her gifts, but receiving her — just being in her presence. There's nobody else on the planet I could say that about. We share everything. Of all the seven and a half billion people on the planet, she's the one I know best. So loving her is almost natural. She literally inhabits every part of my being. How much more shouldn't we desire God — not his gifts and blessings, but him? God himself? Christian atheism does accomplish one thing: it points out the areas of our lives where God has not yet been invited to be our Savior, our Master — our God. So what are we going to do about it? Let's pray!