

## **Practical Atheist** wk 1 **"I believe in God, but I don't know him"**

Morgan Young [www.OakbrookChurch.com](http://www.OakbrookChurch.com) 5.30.10

This new series is called "Practical Atheist." And that means Believing in God but living as though He doesn't exist.

This series is for everyone---that is, everyone who has the guts to admit their hypocrisy.

Because for people who believe in God, there is always a "dropping off" point. A place where we say, "I'm not sure I trust God THAT much..."

I want us to be cautious in this series, because it's easy to callout people who are living at a shallower level in their faith than we are living---but it's another thing to put myself in the shoes of the Rich Young Ruler in Luke 18.

He was a religious man, but Jesus said, (in addition to all the good religious things he'd done) "Sell *all you have* and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in Heaven. Then, come, follow me."

And he couldn't do it. And we say, "Tisk---that poor rich young ruler missed out."

Sandra and I are not even rich, we're middle class---we have a fraction of what the Rich Young Ruler had---and in all honesty I cannot tell you that if God asked me, I could sell all my middle class stuff and give the money to the poor. Just sayin...

So lets all start the journey in this series by agreeing to *not* throw any mental stones at the people who "really need to hear this"--- because the message of the practical atheist is something we all need to hear.

This idea of a Practical atheist goes back to 66 A.D. when Paul wrote about it in this letter to Timothy

As I read this list of things Paul observed in his 66 A.D. culture--mentally check off all the things that you observe in our 2010 culture.

"Don't be naive. There are difficult times ahead. As the end approaches, people are going to be self-absorbed, money-hungry, self-promoting, stuck-up, profane, contemptuous of parents, crude, coarse, dog-eat-dog, unbending, slanderers, impulsively wild, savage, cynical, treacherous, ruthless, bloated windbags, addicted to lust, and allergic to God. They'll make a show of religion, but behind the scenes they're animals. Stay clear of these people."

2 Timothy 3:1-5 The Message

Paul is warning the followers of Christ to "stay clear" of people who believe in God, but live as though God doesn't exist.

And just to bring us up to speed with some data about people who believe in God. Here is some fresh hard data from this past year from the Barna Group.

First the good news:

source: <http://www.barna.org/faith-spirituality/325-barna-studies-the-research-offers-a-year-in-review-perspective>

7 out of 10 adults say that God is the all-powerful, all-knowing creator of the universe who still rules it today. That includes the 93% of born again adults who hold that conviction. [reference](#)

Nearly nine out of every ten adults said their religious faith is very important in their life.

Now for the “but living as though He doesn’t exist” part:

71% say they will develop their own slate of religious beliefs rather than accept a package of beliefs promoted by a church or denomination.

Only 36% of self-identified Christians strongly agree that it is important for followers of Christ to maintain positive relationships with people who are not Christians.

Only one-third believe in absolute moral truth.

Less than 1 in 5 Christian adults has a biblical worldview.

Just *half* of all self-identified Christians firmly believe that the Bible is totally accurate in all of the principles (not the facts, just the principles) that it teaches.

Barely one-quarter of adults are confident that Satan exists.

Only 4% of Christians believe that poverty is an issue that is primarily the responsibility of the Church.

81% of self-identified Christians believe that spiritual maturity is achieved by following the rules in the Bible.

Those are *statistics*—which is always easy to shake our head at. But then there’s Kokomo reality—local reality:

I believe in God but...

- I won’t stop sleeping with my girlfriend/boyfriend.
- I’m going to do whatever I want with my money.
- I’m still going to look at whatever I want to look at on the internet.
- I’m still going to take His name in vain.
- I’m going through with this divorce because it’s what *I* want to do.
- I’m still going to enjoy talking about people behind their back.
- I’m still going to live a life that pretty much revolves around me.
- I’m not going to serve people regularly or be in a group.

- I'm not going to spend any regular time reading His Word.
- I'm not going to spend genuine time with people who don't know God.
- I'm not going to lead my family spiritually.

*Everybody having a good time so far? ;-)*

Anyone else feeling the pain of conviction?

One of the things all Christ followers need is the kind of *comfort-jarring conviction* that a series like this brings.

When we come to church and we feel the pain of conviction—when we feel the cringe of, *"Oooo—I'm like that, but I don't want to be like that."* That's God-inspired conviction and it is a *good thing*.

Listen to these words Paul wrote after he had brought a convicting word to the Church in Corinth.

<sup>8-9</sup>I know I distressed you greatly with my letter. Although I felt awful at the time, I don't feel at all bad now that I see how it turned out. The letter upset you, but only for a while. Now I'm glad—not that you were upset, but that you were jarred into turning things around. You let the distress bring you to God, not drive you from him. The result was all gain, no loss.

<sup>10</sup>Distress(conviction) that drives us to God does that. It turns us around. It gets us back in the way of salvation. We never regret that kind of pain. But those who let distress (conviction) drive them away from God are full of regrets, end up on a deathbed of regrets.

<sup>11-13</sup>And now, isn't it wonderful all the ways in which this distress (conviction) has goaded (spurred) you closer to God? You're more alive, more concerned, more sensitive, more reverent, more human, more passionate, more responsible... "  
2 Corinthians 7:8-13 The Message

And that's the spirit of this series. To wake us up—to turn us around—to get us in line with the ways of God instead of the ways of the culture and the ways of self--- to spur us closer to God.

This is one of the stats I shared a minute ago:

81% of self-identified Christians believe that spiritual maturity is achieved by following the rules in the Bible.

That belief misses the crux of Christianity—which is our relationship with Christ.

It is through knowing Christ that we come into the family of God.

And it is through our relationship with Christ that we spiritually grow up and realize our God-given potential to impact this world.

We live within the rules of the Bible—but the rules don't grow us up—it is only our relationship with God that can mature and transform us.

This relational dynamic ---of Jesus dying on the cross--- so that we can be IN RELATIONSHIP with God exists in NO OTHER faith or religion...

And it IS important to *read* the Bible, *do* what it says, *keep* the commandments. But those *things* ride on the *foundation* of the *unique relationship that you & I have with God*.

Listen to how important this relationship is—and how God speaks to this idea of practical atheism:

“And we can be sure that we know him if we obey his commandments. <sup>4</sup> If someone claims, ‘I know God,’ but doesn't obey God's commandments, that person is a liar and is not living in the truth.” 1 John 2:3-4 NLT

In other words, that person says they believe in God, but their actions may as well be those of an atheist—someone who doesn't believe in God.

And these words are from Jesus Christ Himself:

“Not everyone who calls out to me, ‘Lord! Lord!’ will enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Only those who actually do the will of my Father in heaven will enter.

<sup>22</sup> On judgment day many will say to me, ‘Lord! Lord! We prophesied in your name and cast out demons in your name and performed many miracles in your name.’

<sup>23</sup> But I will reply, ‘I never knew you. Get away from me, you who break God's laws.’” Matthew 7:21-23 NLT

This is one of the most sobering passages in the Bible for me. It's sobering because it's so easy for me to DO the right *things*. But nurturing my relationship with God, is less tangible. Requires more intentionality. It doesn't fit neatly on a “to-do” list.

But Jesus' words, “*I never knew you. Get away from me...*” Those are potentially haunting words. Foreshadowing words---words of warning for us. Words that define our faith as RELATIONSHIP, not religion.

To *know* God takes time. To really know *anyone* --takes time.

Most of you would say, “*Yeah, I know Morgan.*” And for most of you, what you know of me is what you see for one hour on Sunday.

Listen: this is my BEST hour of the week!

But the fact is, you don't see *me at home* after I've had a series of meetings all day.

I'm somewhat *introverted*, so after being with people all day, by 5:00 I get home and I'm out of words! And I'm beyond my ability to HEAR words! ;-)

And you don't see me *through my kids' eyes* after they've done something that I'm *less than thrilled* about.

You don't see me through *Sandra's eyes*, after I've given my best hours of the day to *everyone else*.

And so to *know me* includes words and traits like: creative, knowledgeable, and wisdom --- to words like: irritable, quiet, and moody—and all kinds of words in between ;-)

Now let's put this in different terms. If you know God-- but mostly what you see of Him is what you see for an hour on Sunday...

Then you probably see God with what I call a "grace fixation."

What you see of God is his GRACE. You see his forgiveness.

You see Him covering the worst sin imaginable with Jesus' death on the cross. Because that's what we and most churches talk about on Sunday morning.

And that grace *is* amazing---it *is* beyond words—it's what makes an eternal relationship with God possible. It's what makes it possible for me to *sustain* a relationship with Christ.

But seeing God as just a God of grace—with a grace fixation...

It's like you looking into my home and catching me in a charitable moment with Meghan or Slater after they've done something wrong.

And instead of me *punishing them*, you catch me saying, "You know what? I forgive you. Your actions I don't love—but you—I'll always love---come here..."

And if you saw that you'd think, "Wow. Morgan is just one grace-filled parent. He's just Mr. Grace. I figured he would have punished them for that—but no—he just forgives his kids, gives them a hug and sends them on their way. *Wow!*"

But you'd get an *incomplete* picture of me—you missed all the times I took away a cell phone or sent someone to their room.

And likewise, when we just peek in on God for an hour on Sunday, we get an *incomplete* picture of God.

But as I read the Bible *so that I can know God more fully*. When I pursue God on my own. I see that God has "wrath." What?!

Wrath is "strong, vengeful anger." It's "divine punishment."

When I read the Bible I see that there are times when God *gives blessing* and there are times God chooses to *withhold* blessing.

When we read the Bible, we see that God punishes. God disciplines. (Hebrews 12:5-11)

Sometimes because of our grace fixation, we don't understand when a Christ follower or church leader confronts another Christ follower because of their choices and behaviors. And the response is, "*Who are you to judge? Who are you to call me out on this?! What happened to grace??*"

And by saying that we inappropriately *project our grace fixation with God onto Christ followers*.

Because, listen to Paul's words to Christ followers:

"I wrote you in my earlier letter that you shouldn't make yourselves at home among the sexually promiscuous. I didn't mean that you should have nothing at all to do with outsiders of that sort.

(Get that? Paul says, "I'm ok if you're hanging out with sexually inappropriate people if they don't know God---cause why? They don't know God!")

Or with crooks, whether blue or white-collar. Or with spiritual phonies, for that matter. You'd have to leave the world entirely to do that!

But I *am* saying that you shouldn't act as if everything is just fine when a friend who claims to be a Christian is promiscuous or crooked, is flip with God or rude to friends, gets drunk or becomes greedy and predatory. You can't just go along with this, treating it as acceptable behavior.

I'm not responsible for what the outsiders do, but don't we have some responsibility for those within our community of believers? God decides on the outsiders, but we need to decide when our brothers and sisters are out of line and, if necessary, clean house."

1 Corinthians 5:9-12 The Message

Why are we here talking about this?

Because **how well we know God has everything to do with how we live this life.**

If we see God with a grace-fixation we'll live the life *we want to live*, believing that God will *keep forgiving us* and making it "all good" because that's what God does.

But...instead of seeing God with a grace-fixation-- if we see God as the *Perfect Parent* as the Bible paints Him to be. We will understand that a parent draw lines to keep us from damaging our hearts and the hearts of others.

If we see God as the Perfect Parent, we will understand that our *actions have ramifications*. Just as we sometimes let our children reap the benefits of poor choices, so too our Heavenly Father does with us.

And just as we *still love our children* even though we allow them to experience pain. Through free will, God let's us make our bed and then painfully lie in it sometimes.

But even though God may *discipline us* or *withhold blessing*—(Romans 8:38) nothing can ever separate us from the love of God! That's what makes His parenting perfect.

So if you see God with a grace-fixation –it simply means, that’s all you know of him so far—and it means that there’s far more of Him for you to know.

Psalm 9:10 says,

“Those who know your name trust in you,  
For you, O Lord, have never abandoned anyone who searches for you.”

How much you *trust me*, has everything to do with how much you *know me*.

A lot of you would trust me *walking your dog*. You’d probably trust me to *answer spiritual questions*. Might trust me to do a *funeral* for someone you love.

But if you only know me from our hour on Sunday, you probably would not trust we to watch your *8 month old child* for a week.

If you don’t know me very well, you probably wouldn’t trust me with a *secret you’ve had since childhood*.

But there are a few people in this room, because of how well they know me, might not think of too many people they could trust more than me. In a pinch, I might be one of the first people they call.

And that’s simply because of how well we really know each other.

We TRUST those we KNOW.

**How much we *trust* God—has everything to do with *how much we know* God.**

If you can’t yet trust God with your money—it’s a reflection of how well you know God.

People who know God well, trust Him—and gladly hand Him the first 10% of the money that they know comes from Him.

If you can’t trust God with the affair, or the lie.

If we can’t trust God when our kids are out of our sight.

If we can’t trust God to change the things in us we’re most ashamed of.

If we can’t trust God to save this marriage.

It reveals that there’s more of God for us to know.

It reveals that our relationship with God needs to deepen.

It’s easy to answer the question, “Do you know God?”

The harder thing would be to have “The Office” documentary crew follow us around for a week.

Because how well we know God is honestly reflected in every decision, in every choice, and in every relational interaction we have in the course of a week. We live out in our life, the level of relationship we have with God.

Paul said that, this way,

*"Your very lives are a letter that anyone can read by just looking at you. Christ himself wrote it—not with ink, but with God's living Spirit; not chiseled into stone, but carved into human lives—and we publish it."*

2 Corinthians 3:3 The Message

Our very lives are a letter that anyone can read by just looking at us! (wow)

Because the heart of this message is our individual relationship with God. We want to end this morning by putting this service in *your* hands.

We're going to give some of you an opportunity to come into a relationship with God. Give you space to pray and ask God into your heart...

For others we're giving you an opportunity to rededicate yourself to God. You're a Christ follower-- but the phrase "practical atheist" rings truer for you than you want it to.

So we'll give you space to close the gap between you and God. Maybe to simply put Him first. Maybe to apologize for things only you and He know...

To usher you into to a personal time of 1 on 1 prayer with God---let me pray these simple words over you that Paul wrote to the church at Ephesus.

(Pray)

*"I ask—ask the God of our Master, Jesus Christ, the God of glory—to make you intelligent and discerning in knowing him personally, your eyes focused and clear, so that you can see exactly what it is he is calling you to do, grasp the immensity of this glorious way of life he has for his followers, oh, the utter extravagance of his work in us who trust him—endless energy, boundless strength!"* Ephesians 1:17-19 The Message

Let the screen guide you in a time of salvation or rededication.

(JLee lead partial acoustic version of "Forever Changed")

*Lord, we have built with our hands all the walls that hold us in.  
We have wandered our way in the desert.  
At times Lord, we have struggled against the blessing you have sent.  
But Father, we are here this morning back to the place of surrender.*

*Lord, you meet us here—for some-- in our darkest hour  
But you stir our hearts with your love.*

*And through Christ's unimaginable death on the cross:  
Forever, Father, we are changed by your mercy*

*Forever our hearts are alive  
Forever we are yours, our Savior  
Forever, our hope is in you--Jesus Christ! Amen!*