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#1382

Practical Atheist
I Believe In God But I Don't Fear Him

In the online blogs and forums there's an assortment of interesting debates going back and forth about morality and atheism. A number of people who are atheists seem very offended that others have said they must be immoral and lawless if they don't believe in God.

Actually they're right when they argue that not every atheist is evil. Just because somebody doesn't believe in God doesn't mean they have no standards of morality.

What I've found is, everybody has some personal code they live by. The real question is, what's the rationale behind the code.

Nobody wants to live in a world where there are no ethical standards. Even the people who try to pass themselves off as progressive intellectuals and say that there are no absolutes and each person has to live by his or her own personal code of ethics don't really believe that.

They wouldn't be real happy if their next door neighbor's ethics said it's OK to steal. You can say there's no right and wrong but if your neighbor disappears with your car, suddenly there's going to be a right and wrong.

What most people who argue that there are no absolutes really mean is they don't want any absolutes in areas where they want to do what they want to do. "Don't tell me it's immoral to get drunk or high or sleep around." They're talking about their own personal morality, not morality in general.

Unfortunately though, the flip-side of all this is also true. Just because somebody does believe in God doesn't mean they always live a moral life.

So what we end up with is a whole bunch of atheists living like practical theists and theists living like practical atheists.

Here's what I mean. If there is no God then there's no standard of right and wrong outside of ourselves. If there's no God then who's to say that feeding orphans in the Sudan like Dean Chollar does is any more moral than the Sudan People's Liberation

Army taking them by force and making them fight?

Who's to say that you and I who work for a living are moral and Bernie Madoff, who stole billions is immoral?

If there's no God and we're just accidental products of impersonal evolutionary forces than you have no more authority in declaring right and wrong than I do.

If I just I just come into the world and live a few years and then die and get buried in a hole in the ground and I cease to exist then if I decide mass murder makes me feel good who's to tell me it's wrong? Society? Were the Nazi's wrong? Their society said mass murder was OK!

When an atheist talks about something being immoral or wrong he's talking like a theist. He's talking like someone who actually believes that some authority outside of us set the rules.

But see the knife cuts two ways. When a Christian lives the way they want to instead of the way God tells them to, they're living as if there is no God. They're living as a practical atheist.

This morning we're starting a new series with that title: *Practical Atheist*.

Here's the question that hopefully we'll all be challenged with in the next four weeks: Do I say one thing and do another? Do I say, "Of course I believe in God. I believe that He created the world. I believe that He loves me. I believe that He gave His only begotten Son Jesus to die for my sins."

Do we say all of that, and then in some areas of life conveniently ignore Him?

Fifteen years ago George Barna, who does opinion polling, said his research led him to believe that we were entering a time in American Christianity in which people would pick and choose what they believe.

He said we're quickly moving away from a time when members would join a church because of doctrinal purity and remain loyal to that church. He foresaw Christians going to this church for that event, and that church for another event with no real roots.

Now Barna, the president of the Barna Group writes, "Growing numbers of people now serve as their own theologian-in-residence." And he calls them "cafeteria Christians."

When you go to the cafeteria, what happens? You get this buffet of various things you can eat. You get to pick and choose. Everybody gets what they want.

You want liver and onions? No problem. You're wife will never cook them at home? You can get them at the cafeteria. Everybody can pick out what they want. Everybody can grab what they enjoy. Everybody's in control.

I. It's Possible To Know God But Not Fear Him

Open your Bible this morning to Haggai chapter 1, page 831

Haggai was a Jewish prophet who spoke for God around 520BC. The Assyrians had come down and overthrown Israel and then the Babylonians overthrew the Assyrians. Nebuchadnezzar, who was Saddam Hussein's hero, attacked Judah and Jerusalem and conquered them.

God used these pagan nations to discipline His people because the Jews had rejected God for centuries. They still went through the motions of worship but in their hearts and by their lives they had forgotten God.

The Babylonians leveled the temple at Jerusalem, killed thousands of Jews, and took the rest as slaves to Babylon.

Eventually the Babylonians are overthrown by the Medes and Persians (Persia is modern day Iran). Finally, in 538 BC the Persian king, Cyrus released the Jewish captives and sent 42,360 Jews back home.

When they got there they were devastated. Jerusalem, the holy city, was in ruins. The walls, which protected the city, were torn down. And, most troubling of all, Solomon's temple, which had stood for 375 years was completely leveled.

They were heartbroken but they were so thankful to be back in the land God had given them that they immediately did something as an expression of their faith.

And when the seventh month had come, and the children of Israel were in the cities, the people gathered together as one man to Jerusalem. Then Jeshua the son of Jozadak and his brethren the priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and his brethren, arose and built the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings on it, as it is written in the Law of Moses the man of God.

Though fear had come upon them because of the people of those countries, they set the altar on

its bases; and they offered burnt offerings on it to the LORD, both the morning and evening burnt offerings. Ezra 3:1-3

Even though there was still fear in their hearts because of other enemies, the people got together and worshipped Jehovah God.

Even though they had been through 70 years of humiliation in Babylon they still worshipped God. They didn't say, "Forget Jehovah. He certainly didn't protect us."

They realized that God had judged them and that they deserved it. They had seen first hand that while God punished evil He never goes back on His promises. They believed Jehovah was Lord of heaven and earth. They believed in the God of Israel.

So they started to rebuild the temple. This was the center of worship in Israel. It was an act of spiritual obedience to get the thing rebuilt.

The problem was there were some people who constantly undermined their work. Along with that the work was hard, the land was desolate, and their crops failed.

In just a few years they stopped building the temple and started putting all their focus on themselves. They were overwhelmed by their own anxieties and paralyzed by their own fears.

Read chapter 1, verse 4 & verse 8

God is saying through His prophet, "Get going guys. You're all wrapped up in yourselves here. You're busy building yourselves fancy houses but you're making excuses when it comes to building My house."

So how did they respond? **Read verse 12**

Cyrus sent them back in 538 BC. Everybody was revved up and they offered sacrifices to God and they started on the temple in 536. In just 2 years they were so self focused they made excuses and stopped for 14 years. Finally God uses Haggai to bring them to their spiritual senses and they finish 4 years later in 516 BC.

What made the difference? They stopped fearing everything and everyone else and started fearing God.

It's possible to know God and not to fear Him. They knew God. They worshipped God. But they quickly got in the cafeteria line and started to selectively obey God.

When you read the history of Israel you find out this wasn't a one-time deal with them. They were forever picking and choosing because they were forever losing that sense of fear and reverence.

Now, there's a whole lot of us in this room this morning who say we know God. On any given Sunday there would probably be some who would say, "I don't know Him but I'm open to learn. I'm on an investigative journey." We celebrate that.

The Bible says the way to God is through His Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus Himself said, *I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.* John 14:6

Jesus made this promise in John 5:24, *Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life.*

Knowing God, being born into His family and His kingdom comes by faith in Christ.

Today I'm speaking primarily to myself and everyone who's come to that point in their spiritual lives where they've realized that they've sinned against a holy God and trusted Christ alone as the payment for that sin.

I. It's Possible To Know God But Not Fear Him

II. It's Impossible To Fear God And Not Obey Him

Turn to Isaiah 11, page 613

Isaiah is like a miniature Bible. It clearly details God's judgment against sin but then it declares a message of hope. The Messiah is coming as a savior and a king. First He'll suffer for our sins, then He'll rule the earth.

The prophet Isaiah gives some of the most detailed, specific, precise predictions about Jesus Christ that you'll find anywhere in the Bible. What's really amazing is, they're made 700 years before Jesus was even born.

In Isaiah 11 God gives us a view of the future kingdom when Jesus Christ rules the planet.

Read 1-5

Jesse was the father of King David. Jesus was a direct descendant of David, both through Joseph and Mary. In other places He's called "the son of David" and He'll

rule from David's throne in Jerusalem.

What I want you to see here is that Jesus as King of kings and Lord of lords delights in the fear of the Lord.

The fear of the Lord has multiple facets to it. It's to respond to the Father in reverence, awe, trust, and obedience.

Now listen. If the enthroned Christ, the lion of the tribe of Judah, the One to whom all nations will bow down, delights in the fear of the Lord how much more should we?

Here's a sure-fire measure of whether you fear the Lord in the biblical sense. Do you use the cafeteria approach to life? Do you move your tray down God's line and say, "Oh, give me a few worship songs, I like them. How about a class on my favorite topic or a Bible study on something I'm really interested in. Evangelism? No thanks, that's not my thing. Sacrificial giving. That's OK, I'm not really into that. Giving up internet porn? Woah, that's going too far. Wouldn't want to be a fanatic about this Christianity thing."

If that's your approach to living for God you either don't know Him personally or if you do, the fear of the Lord isn't on your radar screen.

Listen to how the Bible puts the fear of the Lord into the context of living life.

Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, And to depart from evil is understanding. Job 28:28

The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; The judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether. Psalm 19:9

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, But fools despise wisdom and instruction. Proverbs 1:7

The fear of the LORD is a fountain of life, To turn one away from the snares of death. Proverbs 14:27

One writer said, "If someone does not fear the lord, he hasn't even started to know Him. He may know the Scriptures very well, he may have accurate and detailed knowledge of its doctrines, yet if he doesn't fear the Lord, though he may know the Scriptures, he doesn't know the Lord that wrote the Scriptures. Knowledge of the Scriptures without fear of God is not knowledge of God. This becomes knowledge of

God only when it passes from the mind to the heart.”

So while it's possible to know God and not genuinely fear Him, the truth is we may know who God is, we may even know Him personally through His Son, but if we don't fear Him we really don't know him in the fullness of what knowing means. We're lacking an intimate, profound, deep knowledge of God.

The fear of the Lord is a healthy thing.

I. It's Possible To Know God But Not Fear Him

II. It's Impossible To Fear God And Not Obey Him

III. When You Truly Learn To Fear God You'll Never Be The Same Again

Turn to Isaiah 2, page 606

There are obviously different aspects of “fear.” For instance, in Isaiah 2 God is warning about the coming Day of the Lord. The Day of the Lord is a term for last day judgment. It's called a time of darkness, wrath, destruction, and vengeance. This is God's judgment on a unbelieving world when Christ returns.

Read verses 17-19

That word terror, (dɔp, dread) is often translated “fear.” *For thus says the LORD: 'We have heard a voice of trembling, Of fear, and not of peace. Jeremiah 30:5*

If you have never come by faith and trusted God Himself as your Savior, according to the Bible you have something to fear big time. Like it or not, the Bible is explicit when it comes to eternal punishment.

God in Christ suffered the pangs of hell in our place. You say, “Ed, I don't like that. I don't believe in hell.” That's your choice but just remember, I can't create spiritual truth, and you can't either.

We can believe or reject spiritual truth, but we can't determine reality by trying to ignore truth. I can absolutely despise gravity but if I jump off the Bay Bridge gravity wins.

The Bible says, *For if God did not spare the angels who sinned, but cast them down to hell and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved for judgment then the Lord knows how to deliver the godly out of temptations and to reserve the unjust under punishment for the*

day of judgment. II Peter 2:4&9

The Bible says there's a place of judgment called hell.

A wise person doesn't say, "That's not on the menu in my cafeteria, so I'm not going to be afraid."

The Bible says, *Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures.* (I Corinthians 15:3)
Speaking of God, Luke 12:9 says, *Fear Him who, after He has killed, has power to cast into hell; yes, I say to you, fear Him!*

That's a healthy fear. That's a fear we need to have. That's a "your house is burning down, the bridge is out, the tusanami's about to hit" type fear.

So that's a healthy fear, but we can fear God in an unhealthy way too.

If you're a believer you've been justified by faith, but if you mistakenly assume that even though you're saved God's going to throw you into hell if you sin, you're going to be crippled with fear.

Once you see from the Bible that sin has to do with thoughts and attitudes and intent of the heart you're going to realize just how big a sinner you really are. If you understand grace that's going to make you thankful beyond description. Every day you're going to get up and say, "God I can't believe You love me. I can't believe that You've made me a child in Your family."

But if you don't understand grace, you're going to be absolutely paralyzed with fear. Your going to be so terrified you won't be able to function.

That's not what God wants for any of us. God wants us to be free to serve Him, not trapped by fear and dread. When you really learn to fear God biblically, you'll never be the same again.

A couple of weeks ago we looked at Isaiah 6 where Isaiah is given a behind-the-scenes look into the throne room of God. Isaiah, who already knew God personally, is confronted to God in all His majesty.

Look what happens to him. **Read Isaiah 6:5 (page 609)**

He says, "I am undone." Not well done, but undone! Isaiah wasn't just your average guy. God had specifically chosen him out to be a divine representative. God annointed

Isaiah as a prophet and used him to write one of the most significant books in the whole Bible.

Isaiah knew God personally. He'd received his messages directly from the Almighty. But when Isaiah is brought into the heavenly throne room he's blown away.

Here's another godly follower of Jesus who has a similar experience. His name is John the beloved. He's one of Jesus closest disciples. In fact he's the closest of the close. This is about 60 years after the cross and the resurrection and John is exiled to a small Greek island in the Aegean Sea called Patmos. There God allows him to see something.

His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and His eyes like a flame of fire; His feet were like fine brass, as if refined in a furnace, and His voice as the sound of many waters;

He had in His right hand seven stars, out of His mouth went a sharp two-edged sword, and His countenance was like the sun shining in its strength.

John saw Jesus in a way he'd never seen Him before. The veil is pulled back and John sees Jesus in His glory. Now notice the response. *And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as dead.* Revelation 1:14-17

Blown away. When you truly fear God in the biblical sense you'll never be the same.

Here's the question for today. Are you different? Do you live each moment taking God seriously or are you still in the pick and choose mode? Are you praying "Take my life and let it be, consecrated Lord to thee," or are you in the cafeteria line saying, "Give me some of that mercy and some of that forgiveness."

"Commitment? Humility?, Sacrifice? You can keep those God. Those aren't for me.

Ten years ago Wade Roof published a critique of American Christianity titled *Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion*. He wrote a decade ago but he was ominously perceptive. This is what he said, "...the drift over time, and still today, is in the direction of enhanced choices for individuals and toward a deeply personal, subjective understanding of faith and well being."

He said we're falling into a mentality that says that all of life, including religion, is all about what makes us feel good.

It's totally subjective. If it was objective it would be grounded in the Bible, but it's

subjective. We're in the cafeteria and we're picking whatever appeals to us and leaving the rest. We're consumers.

I wonder if I could challenge you with something. We're going to spend 4 weeks focusing on the subject of practical atheism. You could call it functional atheism.

I don't know about you but I've seen myself in some of the things we've talked about today. I've seen myself here, and there's more to come.

Would you be willing to make a covenant before God with me this morning. A covenant that says, "God, I admit my tendencies to pick and choose when it comes to how I live. God I have my excuses. But I'm asking you today to do what David asked in Psalm 139. *Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me, and know my anxieties; And see if there is any wicked way in me, And lead me in the way everlasting.*" Psalm 139:23-24

"Teach me to do more than believe. The devils believe in God and they're even smart enough to tremble. Teach me so much more. Teach me the biblical fear of the Lord."

Are you willing to join me and enter into that covenant with God? Are you willing to say "I'm tired of living like a part-time Christian?"

"God give me a glimpse of Your glory, high and lifted up. Change me from the inside out. I don't want to straddle the fence anymore. It's really uncomfortable!"

"Make my life a sacrifice of praise and worship to You God."