

November 22, 2009 AM
#1385

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

This is week 4 of a 4 week series we've called "Practical Atheist." If you're new with us today you might be wondering what in the world is a practical atheist?

We've defined a practical atheist as someone who believes in God, but lives as if He didn't exist. In other words it's someone who believes in God but functionally operates as if they didn't believe in Him.

In the New Testament book of Titus there's a verse that really sums up practical atheism. It's Titus 1:16 and it describes some in the church on the island of Crete. It says, *They profess to know God, but in works they deny Him.* They claim to believe in Him but you couldn't always tell it in their lives.

They lived in an immoral, spiritually confused culture and so do we. And our great temptation is to try to keep one foot in the world and one foot in God's kingdom; to try and live a little bit like the culture around us, and a little bit like Christians.

In fact, really the heart of this whole series is rooted in the question, do you really personally know God. If you go back to the very first week, we studied the truth that many people believe in God but yet they don't fear Him.

They believe in God yet they still want to do whatever they want to do. They're not going to let God impact their personal lives. We saw how easy it is for all of us to take a cafeteria approach to obeying God.

Why is that? Because we don't really know Him. If we knew Him (and we'll expand upon that word "know" in a minute) we would reverence Him exclusively.

In week 2 the theme was, I believe in God, but I don't want to take Him too seriously. I don't want to go overboard. Why are we lukewarm at times? Because we don't really know Him. If we really knew Him, we would be so passionate you couldn't keep us down.

Week 3 was, I believe in God, but I trust in money. Why would we trust money to provide us with security and happiness? Because we don't really know God in the

fullest sense of the word. If we knew Him, we wouldn't trust anything else to provide what only God can provide.

What I want us to see this morning is there are different levels of knowing. I'll give you an example and you can kind of compare this to what it's like to know God.

Many years ago when I was a skinny high school student, I saw this really cute girl named Sandy. My next door neighbor went to church with her and mentioned her a few times. I didn't know her but I thought I'd like to get to know her.

It could be that you know about God but you're not sure what the next step should be. Hopefully you can find out this morning.

One day I got up the nerve to ask Sandy out and we went to the movies. I picked her up at her house and met her dad for the first time. I didn't know him either. I remember him looking up from the paper and just kind of grunting.

We came from 2 very different worlds spiritually and family wise, but we really hit it off. Her dad told me if I wanted to date his daughter I had to go to church with her. Church wasn't really high on my priority list, in fact, it wasn't on the list at all, but I thought if this is what I need to do to keep seeing this really great girl it was worth it.

So Sandy and I dated. There was so much we didn't know about each other, but we were slowly learning. No permanent commitments at first, but we were finding out about each other.

Maybe that's where you are with God. You know that He exists. You're coming to church and trying to learn about Him. No permanent commitments yet but you're finding out about Him.

That's good. You're moving in the right direction. God is personal and wants us to know Him personally.

Finally, after a few detours on my part, Sandy and I were married. In a sense, we're always getting to know each other better. That's a life-long process, but now we know each other intimately.

I know how she thinks. I know how she reacts to things. I have a deep personal knowledge of my wife.

That's the goal God has for us in our relationship with Him. Intimate, personal, and growing. What I'd like to do today is to break down this truth of not just believing in God but knowing Him into three different levels. My prayer is that you will honestly admit to where you are with God.

Admitting where you are might be slightly painful if you're truly honest. But, in that honesty, I believe that God can do something because He doesn't just want us to believe in Him, but he wants us to also *know* Him. So, let's break this down into three levels.

I. Some Believe In God But They Don't Really Know Him At All

This morning you might be thinking, I believe there's a God. Isn't that enough? My father was an Episcopalian and my mother was a Baptist but we went to church Christmas and Easter. I believe in God. I try to be a good person. I do my best. Isn't that what being a Christian is?

There's this kind of cultural Christian mode that's easy to fall into in our culture.

Turn with me to Matthew 7. Page 855

These are some sobering verses that we're going to look at. **Read verses 21-23**

In our culture it could be, "Didn't we go to Sunday School when we were kids? Didn't we get confirmed? Didn't we dedicate our children at church?"

Didn't we do some good things? Weren't we nice people? Weren't we generally moral? Didn't we give a few dollars to the guy with the little bell outside Wal-Mart? Didn't we do some generally good things?"

According to this passage Jesus will look at some and speak the most frightening words we could ever hear, *I never knew you*. You didn't know me. I didn't know you. We weren't in a relationship. Away from me, you evil doers.

There are so many people who believe in God but do not know Him personally. Some of you, may fit that category. You believe that a guy named Jesus walked the earth 2000 years ago. You believe He was the Son of God, although you're not quite sure all that means. You've believed facts, but you don't really know Him.

You know, you read these verses and at first they don't make sense. you wonder why would Jesus call the religious works of some people who call Him Lord, lawlessness?

What would turn a religious work into a bad work? What would do that would be if we think our religious work is the way to God.

The Bible is so clear. The good works that God values flow out of a relationship with God, they they aren't the cause.

These people say, "Wait a minute Lord. We did all the right stuff. That's what we're trusting in." And Jesus says, "That's not it."

What does doing the will of the father look like when it comes to truly knowing God in a personal way? *Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law (the very commandments of God Himself) no flesh shall be justified.* (Galatians 2:16)

From the Garden of Eden when God promised a savior, through the law of God that showed no one could keep it perfectly, to the New Testament declaration that Christ died for our sins, God was hammering home the point that salvation, forgiveness, knowing Him personally all came by faith.

Jesus Christ died for our sins. Jesus Christ rose again. Doing the will of the father is summed up in trusting Jesus as Savior. Doing the will of the Father is not doing good works in hopes of getting to heaven. That undermines God and elevates people.

Doing the will of the Father is believing that salvation is of the Lord. That elevates God and puts us in our place.

To really know God and to be assured that He knows you, you recognize that you've sinned against the Lord of the universe, and that that same Lord punished His Son in your place.

The Bible says, *Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit.* (Titus 3:5)

To really know God we have to trust Him as our personal Savior.

The Bible says, *For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.* (I Corinthians 1:21)

All the wisdom of the world couldn't figure out how to know God. There's thousands

of religions and philosophies flying around that profess to have the truth. God says no one can figure it out on their own. They need my revelation of truth.

God's revelation consists of a message of a suffering savior. God's revelation is a message of our inability to earn our own forgiveness. That's a message that sounds foolish. That's why no religion in the world has ever come up with it. No body's ever come up with this on their own.

God's message is summed up in John 3:16. *For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.* (John 3:16-18)

I. Some Believe In God But They Don't Really Know Him At All

If that's you this morning you can change that. If that's you this morning, the best you know how you can put your faith in Jesus Christ as Savior.

II. Some Believe In God But Don't Really Know Him Well

Turn to Galatians 4 Page 1035

An apostle named Paul was a first century missionary who visited Galatia which was located in central Asia Minor. Today that's in Turkey around the city of Ankara. Paul told everyone who'd listen about Jesus Christ. He told them how they were separated from their Creator because of their sins and how Jesus came to pay for sin.

A number of Galatians believed, churches were formed, and God was worshiped in spirit and in truth.

But something happened. Jewish teachers came behind Paul and began to convince these non-Jews that they really needed to become Jews and practice all the feast days, laws, and ceremony of Judaism.

The letter to the Galatians is Paul writing them to challenge the Galatians not to be deceived.

Read 4:8-9

He's saying, "Wait a minute. You were idol worshippers. You didn't know God. Then you heard the good news and trusted Christ. You believed God's message and were set free. Now you know God and He knows you. You've received a new life from God. You're in the family.

How come you don't know Him well enough to keep from being deceived by a false message. You know God but not well enough to keep you out of those things that are not going to help you at all.

These people weren't just investigating the faith, they were children of God. They were born again. They knew God but not very well.

Does that describe you this morning? You know God but not well enough to keep from going down a wrong path morally or doctrinally.

Now remember the Bible describes believing in Jesus Christ as a new birth. Then it describes the Christian life as a life of growth. Obviously growth doesn't happen over night.

The Bible commands us to *grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.* (II Peter 3:18)

We just had a new grand daughter born this past Tuesday to My son Josh and his wife. I gotta tell you, she is the cutest baby in the whole wide world! Sorry, if you have a baby and you think yours is the cutest! Yours is cute but...

Little Olive is 7 pounds 4 ounces of dynamic action. She's riding a 2 wheeler already. It's amazing! Actually, she's doing what all babies do. Not much of anything. She just lays there and exudes cuteness. It's cute now, but what if she was a year old and just laid there?

We have good friends whose little girl was stricken with an undiagnosed disease. The doctors have settled on some type of Meningitis but they're really just guessing. Jill was a toddler at the time. Now she's 21 years old. She can't walk, talk, or feed herself. Her mom and dad have a 24/7 job of caring for her.

That's cute when it's a baby. It's a heart breaker when it's a grown person.

The same is true spiritually. When you truly know God but you refuse to nourish yourself with the Bible and exercise by putting God's truth into practice I have to believe it grieves the heart of God. It's a heart breaker.

Years ago I heard a godly older man make this assessment of what he had seen over the decades. He said, “A lot of people start off well in the Christian life. Few finish well.”

Why do few finish well? Because they know God, but not well. They never grow and mature to the point where they can be discerning in life.

And you know, sometimes we can fool all the other people around us. We can quote Bible verses and discuss theology with the best of them. But our personal walk with God is feeble and debilitated because we’re hearers of the Word but not doers.

I hope that doesn’t describe you this morning. But if it does, believe me God wants to see you grow in your intimacy with Him more than you’ll ever know. God isn’t about just dropping the hammer on us if we do wrong. God wants to see His children walking in maturity.

When your children are learning to walk you don’t punish them for falling. You wipe their tears and you help them get up and try again.

God wants us to experience the wonder of having a deep, personal interconnection with Him.

Imagine that. Your Creator wants you to experience intimacy with Him. How absolutely foolish we are when we don’t want the same thing.

I. Some Believe In God But Don’t Really Know Him At All

II. Some Believe In God But Don’t Really Know Him Well

III. Some Believe In God And Know Him Profoundly

This is my prayer for Faith Community Church. Our purpose statement is simple. *The purpose of Faith Community Church is to introduce people to Jesus Christ and equip them to become His devoted followers.*

We want to introduce people to the Savior so they can know Him. There’s all kinds of bogus ideas that people have about Jesus Christ. We want people to see Him as He is. We want people to understand the biblical Jesus who is both Lord of all and Savior. We want people to believe in Him.

Then we want them to grow. We want to see people know Him intimately and profoundly.

What does it mean to know God intimately and to serve Him wholeheartedly? What it

means for me is that I'm becoming more and more aware of God with me all the time. There's an increasing awareness of the presence, the provision, the power, and the peace of God.

It's not like God's over there and I'm over here and every now and then I throw a prayer at Him but it's more of an ongoing conversation. I honestly believe He speaks and He speaks through His Word and His Word speaks to me. He speaks through His Spirit and somehow my spirit is connected to Him.

He speaks through other people, He speaks through circumstances and there's this awareness that as the day goes on God is orchestrating things.

There's an awareness that when I'm about to say or do the wrong thing the Spirit prompts me and I stop. There are other times when I'm about to ignore doing the right thing and God's Spirit prompts me to do the right thing. It's doing life with God.

Turn with me to Psalm 63 Page 512

The heading of this Psalm says "A psalm of David when he was in the wilderness of Judah." This was apparently written while David was on the run from his enemies in the desert.

He loved Jerusalem and the worship that God had designed for Israel but his location didn't determine his relationship with God.

Read 63:1-8

Did you catch that? God Your loving kindness is better than living today. Your love is better than life and because of that, my lips will glorify you. I can't be quiet about you. I will praise you as long as I live and in your name, I lift up my hands. God I seek you, I know you, I've experienced you.

The things of this world don't satisfy my heart. I need more of you. God, I don't just know about you, you're my God. I've seen your power.

I know who you are. My lips are going to declare your goodness. My hands cannot stay down because God, I know you. You're my God. I'm not the same. The old standard has been changed.

I know you, God, and you have my life. I know you and I want to serve you intimately. And

those who know Your name will put their trust in You; For You, LORD, have not forsaken those who seek You. (Psalm 9:10)

Let me just ask you this. How well do you know God? What you call Him could reveal the depth of your intimacy or the lack of your intimacy. *Those who know your name will put their trust in You.*

By what names do you call God?

Isn't the level of our relationship with somebody reflected in what we call them? When I get a phone call and the person on the other end says, "Is Mr. Reeegensburg there?" It's not somebody who knows me at all. They can't even pronounce my name.

If someone calls me Pastor Regensburg it usually means they know about me. If they call me Pastor Ed it means they know me, but usually more on a professional level. If they just call me Ed they know me in a different way. We're friends.

But then there's 3 people who call me "dad" and one who calls me "honey." Our relationship is different than all those others. Each name reveals a different level of intimacy.

If God is the man upstairs or the big guy in the sky, you don't know Him at all. If He's God or Lord you may know Him, but not necessarily. You may just know about Him.

But if you know God as friend, father, as savior, then you know Him in a personal, intimate way.

If you believe in God but you don't fear Him it's because you still don't quite know Him in the fullest sense of the word. If you believe in God but you're not a totally devoted follower of Christ it's because you still don't quite know Him in the fullest sense of the word. If you believe in God but trust money for your daily life it's because you still don't quite know Him in the fullest sense of the word.

You know how I know that's true? Because too often that's been me. I'm the practical atheist. If there is any reason that this whole series feels very authentic to you, it's because it is my life story.

But if there's any real passion coming out it's because God's still at work in my life.

After 44 years of being a believer God's still faithfully working through the stuff of life, the truth of His Word, and the power of His Holy Spirit.

I'm so glad we worship a faithful, merciful, patient, persistent God. I am knowing Him better and better and better and better and as I do know Him, let me tell you what happens, I'm different. As I grow to know Him, I become more generous in every way. As I grow to know Him, my heart breaks for the things that breaks the heart of God. As I grow to know Him, I become more passionate about Him and I don't care as much as what people think because I'm living for Him and not for the approval of people. As I grow to know Him, I burn within me to make His name famous in the world.

I want others to know the same freedom and the same joy and the same peace and the same forgiveness and the same life that I have from knowing Him. Not knowing about Him, but knowing Him personally as Savior, as Father, as the lover of my soul.

So, here's the close. Here's the close to the whole series. If God has been speaking to you and rattling you throughout these 4 weeks, great. He's been rattling me. This has been my prayer for you throughout this whole series, this is my prayer for our church...

Ephesians 1:17-19 That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints and what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe.

Let's pray.