

Series: ***I BELIEVE IN GOD, BUT...*** January 8, 2012

THE CHRISTIAN ATHEIST

Romans 7, Matthew 7:21-27, Titus 1:16

Speaker: Ken Davis

1. I want to read several statements to you and have you tell me whether you think they're true or false:

***When push come to shove, I am more important than God; What I want is more important than what God wants**

***What I think is right is more important than what God says is right**

***My work is more important than my marriage, my family, God or my health**

***Meeting my own sexual needs is more important than doing what God says is good and right**

***My ego and my need to be right is more important than God or others**

***I want to go to Heaven, but there's *no* way God's gonna run my life!**

***What others think of me is more important than what God thinks of me**

***Having money or saving money is more important than being honest**

***It's okay to mold and shape and otherwise modify the truth if it makes me look better and keeps me out of trouble**

-How many of you think any of these statements are true—or okay to base your life on? I've believed in God and the truth of the Bible for over 50 years—and ***never*** believed these statements are actually true. And yet, at some point, I've lived my life based on one or more of them. Hi, my name is Ken—and I have to admit that I'm a **recovering Christian atheist**. Can anyone relate?

- a. Knowing the right thing to do was almost ***never*** a problem for me. Actually ***doing*** it—especially with the right heart and attitude--was. Outwardly, I was never a bad kid, really. I was smart enough to put on a pretty good show—at least until I was in my mid-teens. It was at that point that I realized that I was pretty much a fake—and got serious about confessing my failure and asking Jesus to forgive me and live at the core of my life and guide my decisions. I ***believed*** He could change me—but actual change was a tough road. Later, I read a passage that thoroughly described me:

I want to do what is good, but I don't. I don't want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway. But if I do what I don't want to do, I am not really the one doing wrong; it is sin living in me that does it. I have discovered this

principle of life—that when I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what is wrong. (Romans 7:19-21 NLT)

- b. This morning we're starting a series called, **I Believe in God, But...** Specifically I want to talk about atheism. **Christian** atheism. Do you know what a **Christian Atheist** is? A **Theist** is someone who believes in the existence of God. An **a-theist** is a person who does not believe that God exists. A **Christian Atheist** is a person who believes that God exists, but lives as if He doesn't.

-A lot of what I'm going to talk about comes out of this book, **The Christian Atheist**, by Craig Groeschel. If you're interested in a copy, we can get one for you. Craig tells us how he came up with the idea. On a recent trip, he took two different flights to get to his destination. On the first, he sat next to a middle-aged businessman who, when he found out that Craig was a pastor, launched into a rant about believers—that they were some of the weakest people he'd ever met, using God as a crutch. He was a conventional atheist.

-On the second flight he sat next to someone he described as a witty, bright grad student just starting her summer break. When she found out that Craig was a pastor, she gushed a whole stream of Christian words and stories. She talked about how she'd met Jesus—and wanted to share her faith—but, instead, slipped back into her old way of life. She described the problems she was having with her live-in boyfriend, and how she was doing things with him that she knew weren't right—and was too busy to connect with other believers or pray. Then she said, in closing, *"I know that my life doesn't look like a Christian's life should look, but I do believe in God."*

-It would be very easy to make some smart, condescending remark about this girl—but, truth is, Christian atheists are everywhere—in every church—and are found in every church—whether the pastors wear robes and crosses—or yell and sweat. Christian atheists are found teaching in seminaries, serving in inner city missions and giving their lives in AIDS clinics. And most of us are either struggling with—or recovering from at least some form of it.

2. What I'd like to do in the next few weeks is talk about some of the key areas where it would appear that we struggle with actually living out what we believe is true about Jesus—and what it means to follow Him.

-First, let's be clear that when it comes to God and religion, people have **always** had a list of right doctrines—doctrines that they were willing to fight for! And sometimes those battles have gotten ugly, hateful and divisive. Amazing, isn't it, that people would get hateful and disrespectful over things related to someone who said his true followers would be known by the way they **loved** one another!

-Truth is, some of the most religiously careful people who have ever lived—people who went to **great** lengths to obey the letter of the law--**hated** God when He showed up in human form! And Jesus warned them—these upstanding citizens—that despite their apparent love for truth and adherence to the law—they were headed for hell and taking others with them! **That's** scary!

-But it's true, isn't it? We **love** to talk, debate, philosophize, pontificate. We **love** our opinions—and we'll talk about them and scrap over nuances in doctrine for hours—years—centuries. But it's pretty clear that a person can **believe** all the right, cool things about truth, about what the church ought to be—you know, talk a **really** good talk—and never love the way Jesus said to love. Let me get specific.

- a. Many of us, if asked, would passionately defend what the Bible says as God's Word—that it's both true and accurate in all that it teaches. And yet...kinda like you saw in the video, we edit out the parts we struggle with because they ask too much.
 - b. I think everyone here would agree that being forgiven—by God and others—is one of the most freeing and amazing experiences there is. And yet, when it comes time for **us** to dump our load of grudges and forgive, we think, "You know, I kinda **like** that one! Maybe **next week...!**"
 - c. How many you feel a certain fondness and respect in your heart for stingy, selfish people? Generosity—especially when it's connected with mercy and compassion is one of the most breathtakingly beautiful things in the world. We sure hope God will be generous with us! And yet...when it comes to **us** showing sacrificial generosity as God describes it—well...!
 - d. Does anyone here worry? How many of you **enjoy** it? I **hate** worry...and I know that my life is solidly in God's hands—and I've seen Him do **amazing** things. Yet—I get anxious—and bite my nails. Lori says, "Stop biting your nails!" I say, "Mind your own business!"
 - e. And then there's the whole issue of sex, lust, thought life—and the craving we have to be loved, to be held, to satisfy this...**nagging, demanding** pest we call **sexual desire**. There's not a sane person here who would call what's happening in our world in the sexual arena—even remotely healthy. And yet...when it comes to how we handle our **own** sexuality—we're convinced God would say, "Well, it's wrong for everyone else...but for **you...**I'll make an exception."
 - f. Most of us here would agree that the **best news on the planet** is that God has made a way for everyone to come home, for their sins to be forgiven—and that He is, right now, at work to make **everything** right and **everything** new. This is **Good News!** It changes the whole trajectory of a person's life! And yet--when it comes time to actually **talk** about Jesus has given us, we choke! Seize up with fear.
3. Here's the question: **Why?** Sometimes, just to be totally honest, it has to do with **what kind** of beliefs we hold—and how deeply they go. I've talked about this before so, if you've got it all nailed down and memorized, just listen to your I-pod for a minute.
- a. There are **public convictions**. These are the things I want other people to **think** I believe. There was a **really** embarrassing moment in the US political

debates a few months ago? Rick Perry announced that he was going to abolish 3 government agencies—and then couldn't remember what they were!

-In our world, political correctness is a **huge** deal, right? There are politically correct things to say in marriage. Someone asks, "Do you think my hips are getting too big?"—and the **right** answer is...? "Why, I didn't even know you **had** hips!" Those are **public conviction**.

- b. We could call another set of convictions **private convictions**. My private convictions are things I sincerely **think** I believe—until they're put to the test. The night before Jesus died, Peter said, "Lord, I will **never** deny you! I will stay with you—even if I have to die!" Well, two crows from the rooster later—he realized that fear does **strange** things to core beliefs. Sometimes we choose ignore evidence for things we don't **want** to believe—that one of your kids is on drugs—or that your husband is cheating on you.
- c. And then there are **core convictions**. Our **core convictions** are revealed, not by what we say in public or think we believe...but by what we actually do. **This** is the person who may never say much of anything about generosity—but their bank account has GENEROSITY written in big letters all through it. It's the person who may not say much about love and integrity—but even the people who brush by them feel blessed. **Core** convictions are seen when what you say you believe matches how you life.

-The record of Jesus describes Him as being **full of grace and truth**. He's the only One who lived a life where what He said and how He lived were a perfect match. The point of Christian Atheism is that it's possible to **say** that you believe in a life of goodness, truth, love, faithfulness and integrity—and **actually believe your own words** when **core convictions** of your life sound more like...

***I believe that a lie is a bad thing, but it might be necessary for me to avoid pain...**

***I believe it pays to be nicest to people who are wealthy, attractive, smart, athletic or successful...**

***I believe I have the right to pass judgment on other people**

***I believe I have the right to gossip about others**

***I believe that things have not gone as well for me as they should, so I deserve another little treat: another donut, another drink, another pill, another fantasy...**

***I believe that God's mission to bring an end to sin, injustice, lovelessness and pain is *not* worth risking my affluence for...**

-**No one's** going to print out a creed like that on the back of their business card—or on the signature page of their email, are they?

4. Now—we **all** struggle with matching public convictions with private convictions with core convictions, right? And the **question** is... **Why?** Sometimes we're in a rut. There is apparently a sign on one of the back roads up north that says, **Choose your rut carefully—you'll be in it for the next 50 km.** Ruts **happen--** don't they? They start in the brain—that's why it has all these furrows in it! We keep revisiting the old thoughts—and reactions; the old habits and fantasies—and the buzz they bring. With no effort at all, we plunge right back into the old attitudes—and we really don't even think. We just react! Go! Talk! Act! Blow up!
- a. But sometimes our behaviour is more intentional than that. The best term for it is... **stubbornness.** We know what's right—but we refuse to **do** what's right, because that would mean repenting, saying we're sorry, giving up the little thrill we feel—I mean, the cost is just too high. It's easier to change the **Bible** than change our behaviour, right? We just put a different label on things like temper, or a critical spirit or grudges or greed. And we **justify** ourselves at God's expense.
- b. Sometimes I would have to admit that I call myself a follower of Jesus—and yet live differently because of pure unbelief. To say that Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah, the Lord of all, the way, truth and life—is to say that He is brilliant beyond belief; that he's not just right about how to find eternal life—He's **right about everything that has to do with life.**
- After His world changing teaching we now call the **Sermon on the Mount—** Jesus made a powerful comment. He said:
- Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!' (Matthew 7:21-23 NIV)**
- Did you catch what He's saying here? It's not knowing His will, calling Him by the right name, **Lord—**or even being a prophet, casting out demons or performing miracles—that makes you a part of His Kingdom. It's **doing** the will of the Father. He's saying, "I've just told you what that is!" Please understand—Jesus is not telling people that they can find eternal life by performance. It's saying that people's **faith in** and **love for** God will ultimately be seen by the lives they build, not from the things they say.
- It's a tough thing to admit and live out, isn't it? You know, that Jesus is right about **everything—**not just things that don't conflict with my lifestyle and personality—or what I think will bring me happiness—or what I **feel.**
- c. And that brings me to the third barrier I think we face--**narcissism.** In our culture, narcissism sounds like this: "I'm special! I'm different than most people! The rules don't really apply to me. I can do things, make claims, treat others and act in ways that others can't. God has given me a hall pass that

says, **You have MY permission to contradict what I say leads to life and peace—and still be happy!** Now, does anyone here have a card like that? NO! Because it's the oldest lie in existence: Our desire to be 'god.'

-Jesus closed off this incredible message he gave about truth with an illustration everyone could relate to. It's pretty self-explanatory.

“Anyone who listens to my teaching and follows it is wise, like a person who builds a house on solid rock. Though the rain comes in torrents and the floodwaters rise and the winds beat against that house, it won't collapse because it is built on bedrock. But anyone who hears my teaching and doesn't obey it is foolish, like a person who builds a house on sand. When the rains and floods come and the winds beat against that house, it will collapse with a mighty crash.” (Matthew 7:24-27 NLT)

-Everyone...**everyone** builds a house...a life. Everyone...**everyone** eventually faces a storm. Houses—all pretty much look the same—because, see, the foundation is largely hidden. In life, it's the storms that reveal what we've built our lives on. Sometimes the storms hit in this life. And that's good because, see, you want to know what your life is based on before the ultimate storm—death—comes.

-Jesus doesn't even **hesitate!** He says, “What I'm telling you about life is a rock-solid foundation. But you have to do **more** than memorize it, understand it, and figure out what all the words mean. Jesus says,

Anyone who listens to my teaching and follows it is wise, like a person who builds a house on solid rock. (Matthew 7:24 NLT)

-James, brother of Jesus and early leader in the church is **very** blunt about connecting what we believe with how we live. He says,

But don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves. (James 1:22 NLT)

A few verses later he says something **very** shocking:

But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.” Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds. You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder. (James 2:18-19 NIV)

-Paul affirms this in a letter to Titus quite bluntly. In talking about false teachers, he says:

Such people claim they know God, but they deny him by the way they live. They are detestable and disobedient, worthless for doing anything good. (Titus 1:16 NLT)

Makes you want to ask, “Wow, Paul. Tell us how you *really* feel!”

5. Now, I think all these things—ruts, unbelief, stubbornness, narcissism and ignorance have played a part in my struggle as a recovering Christian Atheist. But the **biggest** for me—and maybe you is **fear**. Or, lack of faith. You could put it like this: “Okay. What if I really go out on a limb here? What if I decide that I’m going to tell the truth—even if it makes me look and feel like a terrible person? What if I decide that I’m going to obey God in the area of generosity—even if it doesn’t make financial sense?

-What if I decide that I’m going to honour God in how I handle my sexuality, in how I forgive, in how I work—in those arenas that *really* leave me vulnerable and exposed? **Does it work? Will God work? Will He come through for me? If I go WAY out on a limb—will I fall on my head—or will Jesus be there?**

-And it’s at this very point that fear kicks in—and faith runs for its life. We don’t say NO—at least audibly. We just say, “Maybe some other day.” And we revert to atheism. Because, see, if God is who He says He is—good, powerful—willing to help us—the Giver of life—and if this life is found in his Son—then to turn away from it is, in essence, an act of distrust. Now, is this accurate—or do you think maybe I’m exaggerating?

-You can talk to people who’ve stepped out in faith in any of these areas—and I think they would say, pretty much in unison, “If you take a step of faith toward God--you will **never** be sorry.” But that’s not enough. **You** have to take that step. And that’s what I’m going to be encouraging you to do as we move through this series together, okay?

Q & A

6. If you don’t mind, I will close with a story—and a challenge—and then we’re done.
-For a number of years, I’ve gone on camping trips with my kids to a lake east of North Bay, called Lake Talon. We camp at what are known as **the chutes**—where Talon feeds into the Mattawa River. It’s a gorgeous place with high rock walls—and **great** fishing, I might add. But, I digress!

-About 14 years ago, Brian and I went up there together—and camped on one of the shores near the chutes. I had to be careful because the water was shallow—so I tied the bow to a tree on the shore and then tied an anchor on the back of the boat to keep the engine in deep water.

-The next morning when Brian and I were leaving to troll for pike, I noticed that the boat seemed sluggish in moving away from the shore. When in doubt, use more power! So, I hit the throttle—hard. I could barely hear Brian yelling, **Dad! Dad! DAD!** Impatient, I said, “**What!?**” “**The ANCHOR!**” I had forgotten to pull up the anchor—and boats don’t do real well when they’re still anchored!

-But I was doing better than most—so well that the anchor was hitting the prop—and flying in the air! If you doubt me, I brought the anchor for you to examine and understand how stupid I really am. Brian has had **loads** of fun with his, ‘**Dad and the anchor**’ story.

-Here's my point—and there **is** one! If you're going to move out into deep water—there comes a time when you have to untie the bow line—and bring up the anchor. Boats—boats like mine, anyways, are not floating docks. They're meant for deep water—for skimming cross the water on summer days, for fishing, for waterskiing and tubing and wake-boarding—not for sunning on the deck like a turtle on a rock.

-Can you fall and get hurt when you're skiing? Well, it depends on whether or not you're an expert skier—like **moi!** Actually, yes! Are there storms? Yep! Are there waves? Yep! Can you get seasick—and find yourself in danger! Yep! But it's **what boats are for!**

-And **we** were made for God. We were made for obedience and truth and love and purity and generosity and forgiveness. We were made to grow, to be challenged—to be like Jesus! We have been made in the image of God! We have been adopted as God's children! The Spirit—the most powerful force in the universe—lives in our hearts, and His goal is to make us new. But we can't **any** of that—so it takes **faith!**

-Here's my question: **What's your anchor? What's holding you back? Where are you trying to be in both worlds—the world system which feels normal—and the life God is calling you to?** And my challenge? Would you be willing to pull up the anchor—and push out of the shallow water?

-We're going to be taking communion this morning. It could be that as you take the bread and cup—representing Jesus' life—poured out for you and me—that you want to identify the anchor that's holding you back--and leave it at the cross. Hey, **why not?**