

Believing in God but Living as If He Doesn't Exist

theChristianatheist

CRAIG
GROESCHEL

Six Sessions
PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE

When You Believe in God but Don't Really Know Him

THEISM

[**thee**-iz-uhm]

belief in the existence of God

ATHEISM

[**ey**-thee-iz-uhm]

disbelief in the existence of God

PRACTICAL ATHEISM

[**prak**-ti-kuhl **ey**-thee-iz-uhm]

acting with apathy, disregard, or lack of interest toward belief in God

CHRISTIAN

[**kris**-chuhn]

one who professes belief in the teachings of Christ

CHRISTIAN ATHEISM

[**kris**-chuhn **ey**-thee-iz-uhm]

believing in Christ but living as if he doesn't exist

Video

When You Believe in God but Don't Really Know Him

(18 Minutes)

Play the video segment for session one. As you watch, use the outline below to follow along or to take notes on anything that stands out to you.

Notes

So many people believe in God but they do not know him (Titus 1:16).

Three levels of knowing God

- Level 1: *I believe in God but I don't know him.*
- Level 2: *I believe in God but I don't know him well.*

Galatians 4:8 – 9

- Level 3: *I believe in God, know him intimately, and serve him wholeheartedly.*

Example: David is described as a man after God's own heart (1 Samuel 13:14).

Psalms 63:1 – 4

Psalm 9:10

What you call God often reveals how well you know him.

If you seek God with all of your heart he will reveal himself to you (Deuteronomy 4:29; Ephesians 1:17 – 19).

Group Discussion

When You Believe in God but Don't Really Know Him (5 Minutes)

Take a few minutes to talk about what you just watched.

1. What part of the teaching had the most impact on you?
2. How do you respond to the idea of "Christian Atheism"?

Individual Activity

How Well Do I Know God? (5 Minutes)

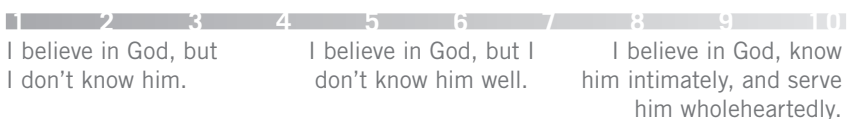
Complete this activity on your own.

1. Briefly review the following list of statements and place a checkmark next to those you feel are true for you.
 - ☐ I believe God loves everyone, but I sometimes struggle to believe that God loves me.
 - ☐ I often feel disconnected from God.
 - ☐ I pray when I need help, but I don't routinely spend time with God.
 - ☐ I feel trapped in a cycle of shame about my past.
 - ☐ I don't feel much need or desire to read the Bible.
 - ☐ I sincerely believe in God, but I can't say I prioritize my life around him.

- ☐ I don't feel the same devotion to God as I did when I first became a Christian.
- ☐ There are some things about me that I know aren't what they should be, but I don't know if I can ever really change.
- ☐ My belief in God doesn't seem to keep me from worrying a lot.
- ☐ My lifestyle, actions, and decisions don't always line up with what I say I believe about God.
- ☐ I don't talk about my faith with people who don't believe in God.
- ☐ I don't experience worship or express praise to God in my daily life.
- ☐ I find it difficult to forgive people who have hurt me.
- ☐ My sense of security is impacted more by how I am doing financially than by how I am doing spiritually.
- ☐ I believe in God, but I'm not so big on the church.
- ☐ I'm not sure my heart breaks for the things that break the heart of God.
- ☐ I tend to diminish or overlook my sins and failures rather than grieving them.
- ☐ I don't often experience a passionate desire to please God.
- ☐ It feels like a long time since I've heard God's voice or experienced God's leading in my life.
- ☐ I sometimes feel God is not fair.
- ☐ It's rare for me to feel completely surrendered to God. Sometimes I'm not even sure I want to be.

2. Circle the two or three statements on the checklist that best describe where you're at spiritually right now. Or you may wish to write your own statement below.

3. Based on your responses from the checklist, circle the number on the continuum that best describes the degree to which you feel you know God.



Group Discussion (30 Minutes)

How Well Do I Know God?

1. Describe your experience of working through the checklist. For example, was it uncomfortable, confirming, surprising? Why?
2. How do you feel about the number you circled for question 3 in the individual activity? Would you say that the level at which you know God now is the highest it's ever been? Lowest? Somewhere in between?
3. If you feel comfortable, share one or more of the statements you circled on the checklist. Why do you think this statement is true for you right now?

Connecting Love and Obedience

Throughout the Old and New Testaments, the Bible makes a strong connection between knowing God and living for God. In an authentic relationship with God, it is impossible to separate love from obedience, belief from behavior, faith from practice. Each reinforces and balances the other.

4. Go around the group and have a different person read aloud each of the passages listed below. As the passages are read, underline any words or phrases that stand out to you. You may wish to read each passage twice to give everyone time to listen and respond.

Know therefore that the Lord your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments (Deuteronomy 7:9).

But be very careful to keep the commandment and the law that Moses the servant of the Lord gave you: to love the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, to keep his commands, to hold fast to him and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul (Joshua 22:5).

If we are to be new people in Christ, then we must show our newness to the world. If we are to follow Christ, it must be in the way we spend each day.

WILLIAM LAW,
*A Serious Call to
a Devout and Holy Life*

Fine feelings, new insights, greater interest in "religion" mean nothing unless they make our actual behavior better; just as in an illness "feeling better" is not much good if the thermometer shows that your temperature is still going up.

C. S. LEWIS,
*Mere
Christianity*

*The word obedient comes from the Latin word *audire*, which means "listening." . . . Jesus' life was a life of obedience. . . . Jesus was "all ear."*

HENRI J. M. NOUWEN,
Making All Things New

Such people claim they know God, but they deny him by the way they live (Titus 1:16 NLT).

And we can be sure that we know him if we obey his commandments. 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. But those who obey God's word truly show how completely they love him. That is how we know we are living in him. Those who say they live in God should live their lives as Jesus did (1 John 2:3–6 NLT).

5. Based on these passages, how would you describe the connection between loving God and obeying God?

6. Describe the characteristics of someone trying to live one way or the other — loving God without obeying God or obeying God without loving God. In either case, what good things do you think the person might miss out on in their relationship with God?

7. Would you say you have experienced what the passages describe — obeying God out of love and loving God with your obedience? If so, describe your experience and how it's impacted you. If not, what would you say is the hardest part for you — obeying God out of love or loving God with your obedience?

Loving Obedience

8. If we affirm that failures to obey God are sin, the next challenge is how to overcome those failures in our lives. In *Surrendering to Love*, author David Benner describes the role of God's love in helping us move from disobedience to obedience:

My attachment to sinful ways of being is much too strong to ever be undone by mere willpower.... Genuine transformation requires vulnerability. It is not the fact of being loved unconditionally that is life-changing. It is the risky experience of *allowing myself* to be loved unconditionally.

If genuine transformation requires vulnerability, do you think disobedience could be described as a refusal to be vulnerable with God? Why or why not?

There is only one way to love God: to take not a single step without him, and to follow with a brave heart wherever he leads.

FRANÇOIS FÉNELON,
Christian Perfection

What [God] desires is reverential intimacy. He wants us close enough to him that we know his heart — close enough to hear his heartbeat. He wants to look into our eyes, and he wants us to look into his.

DAVID G. BENNER,
Surrender to Love

9. Would you say that you have had a risky experience of allowing yourself to be loved unconditionally by God? If you have and if you feel comfortable doing so, share that experience and the impact it has, or once had, on your ability to obey God. If not, what do you think prevents you from allowing yourself to be loved unconditionally by God?

Individual Activity **What I Want to Remember** (2 Minutes)

Complete this activity on your own.

1. Briefly review the outline and any notes you took.
2. In the space below, write down the most significant thing you gained in this session — from the teaching, activities, or discussions.

What I want to remember from this session ...

Closing Prayer

Close your time together with prayer.



Between-Sessions Personal Study

● READ AND REFLECT

Read the introduction and chapter 1 of *The Christian Atheist*. Use the space below to note any insights or questions you want to bring to the next group session.

● MAKING IT PERSONAL

A Christian Atheist might sound like someone who's got a faith problem or perhaps at least a spiritual confusion issue. But the core problem for the Christian Atheist isn't belief; it's intimacy. The Christian Atheist doesn't really know God very well.

Belief isn't the same as personal knowledge.

The Christian Atheist, page 33

1. Think about your closest relationship. Of the following list of factors, which *three* would you say have been most important in keeping it strong and growing?

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Time together | <input type="checkbox"/> Acceptance |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Having fun | <input type="checkbox"/> Talking things through |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Respect | <input type="checkbox"/> Forgiveness |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Honesty | <input type="checkbox"/> Trust |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Vulnerability | <input type="checkbox"/> Loyalty |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Communication | <input type="checkbox"/> Fighting fair |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Shared interests | <input type="checkbox"/> Support/encouragement |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Generosity | <input type="checkbox"/> Kindness |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Compassion | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: |

Write the three items you identified on the checklist in the left column on the chart below. Use the remaining columns to describe why this factor has been important in your closest relationship and how you experience it in your relationship with God.

RELATIONSHIP FACTOR	WHY THIS HAS BEEN IMPORTANT IN MY CLOSEST RELATIONSHIP	HOW I EXPERIENCE THIS IN MY RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD
Example <i>Time together</i>	Example <i>We've shared a lot of different experiences and we've seen each other at our best and our worst. It's built a lot of history and trust between us.</i>	Example <i>I'm not as intentional about spending time with God. I do try to check in with him throughout the day but I sometimes forget.</i>

What stands out most to you when you consider the similarities and differences in your closest personal relationship and your relationship with God?

What two or three things have you learned in your closest personal relationship that might help you to seek God and get to know him better?

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God cares about how we live. And a relationship with God naturally will flow out in daily attitudes and actions. So if you *look* good, you *are* good, right? Well, maybe not. Knowing God can lead to a positive lifestyle, but the reverse isn't true. Our outward actions alone don't prove that we enjoy an inward relationship with God. Just because we *do* good doesn't mean we know the One who *is* good.

The Christian Atheist, page 35 – 36

2. Knowing God requires more of us than simply believing God exists (James 2:19). And it requires more of us than dutiful adherence to Christian rules (Galatians 4:6 – 11). Knowing God requires loving obedience, an obedience that comes from the heart.

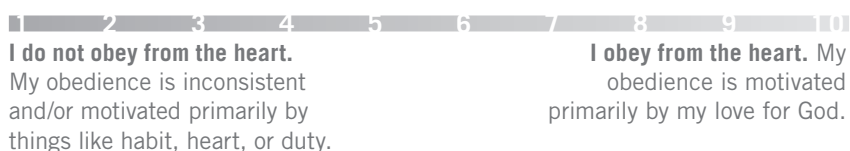
Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Anyone who does not love me will not obey my teaching. These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me (John 14:23 – 24).

But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you have come to *obey from your heart* the pattern of teaching that has now claimed your allegiance (Romans 6:17, emphasis added).

John used the image of a home to describe the intimacy of the relationship God wants with us. Place an X on the continuum below to indicate the degree to which obeying Christ's teaching has allowed God to make his home with you.



In Romans, the apostle Paul spoke of obeying God from the heart. Place an X on the continuum below to indicate the degree to which you feel this is true for you.



Based on your responses on the two continuums, would you say your experiences of obedience (or disobedience) are drawing your heart closer to God or pulling your heart farther away from God?

How do you imagine your life might change if love for God more consistently motivated your actions and decisions? Overall, would you say these are changes you'd be eager or reluctant to experience? Why?

As you get to know him better, you will change.

The Christian Atheist, page 43

3. God is in the transformation business. The more we get to know him, the more his love changes us. He brings healing and wholeness that enables us to rest in his love and to follow him *wholeheartedly*. Here is how the prophet Ezekiel described God's heart-changing promise:

And I will give them singleness of heart and put a new spirit within them. I will take away their stony, stubborn heart and give them a tender, responsive heart, so they will obey my decrees and regulations. Then they will truly be my people, and I will be their God (Ezekiel 11:19–20 NLT).

In what ways, if any, would you say your heart might be divided, stony or stubborn toward God?

Write a brief prayer asking God to honor his Ezekiel promise by giving you an undivided heart — a heart that is tender and responsive to him.

Getting to know God isn't difficult, and it isn't about a bunch of rules. Yes, God wants your obedience, but he wants your heart even more. He loves you so much. Surrender yourself to that love, and it will be certain death for Christian Atheism — a death that will lead to a whole new life of knowing God.