

“AUTHENTIC CHRISTIANITY”
“BELIEVING VS. KNOWING”
Psalm 63:1-8

Many of you have probably read the school assignment that little Danny Dutton is supposed to have written. Danny was eight years old in the 3rd grade and was given an assignment to “explain God.” It is a very insightful and humorous chronicle of God and God’s world. At one point Danny explains his take on atheists. Danny says, “Atheists are people who don’t believe in God. I don’t think there are any in our town, (Chula Vista, California). At least there aren’t any who come to our church.”

If you asked me if we had any atheists in our church, or if there were any atheists that *came* to our church, I would have said, probably not. I am sure we have some who doubt God’s existence. And maybe most of us have at some time or another. But outright atheists, who declare absolutely that there is no God, I would have thought that would be pretty rare.

But then I read a book called “*Christian Atheists*” and that has changed by thoughts completely. I first heard about the book just a few months ago. It just came out this year. It was written by Craig Groeschel. Craig is the senior pastor of LifeChurch.TV. The church started in 1996 and today has over eighty weekly worship services in fourteen locations. In the introduction to the book Craig confesses in the very first sentence that he is a recovering “Christian atheist.” Listen to the description of his life growing up. It may sound familiar. “I was born into a Christian family. We believed in God and attended church when convenient—and always on Christmas or Easter. And when we did attend, it was always boring. Some older man wearing what looked like a dress would stand at the pulpit for what seemed like forever, talking about stuff that didn’t make any sense to me.” He went on to describe the Bible that sat prominently in their home but was never read and the rote prayers that always rhymed that were occasionally offered at meal times that didn’t seem to mean much to anyone. He also went on to describe his years growing up and the many inconsistent things in his life including the parties and the sinful life he lived, yet all the while he considered himself a good person and a Christian. Craig’s point is that if we say we believe in God, yet live as though he doesn’t exist, we may just be “Christian atheists.”

As I read “*Christian Atheist*” I listened to a man of God who honestly examined his own life, even today as a pastor and described his own struggles with his relationship with God and what God is showing him about living an authentic God-honoring life.

The first thing we need to remember is that there is a difference between “believing” and “knowing” when it comes to a relationship with God. The surveys show that 94% of Americans say they believe in God. Is that right? Then there are only 6% who don’t believe in God and who are atheists. But why are there only 33% that go to church? The majority of those who believe in God say they pray, but they pray once a week. If you believed in God, why wouldn’t you worship him and gather with other Christians in God’s house and pray to him daily and read his “Word” that he wrote to you

and live a life that honored him? The reality, says Groschel, is that far too many people say they believe in God but live a life as if he doesn't exist.

Could that be possible? Listen to these passages. *“Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder,”* (James 2:18b-19). James understood that believing that God exists is never enough. Demons and the Devil believe that God exists. They believe in God, and they shudder when they do so. Belief, when real and genuine, issues in a life that is changed. It is accompanied by a life that proves the belief genuine.

Paul wrote to the Christians in Galatia and said, *“Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods. But now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again?”* (Galatians 4:8-9). Paul speaks to a time when they did religious things, but did not know God. And he speaks to a current situation where they supposedly do know God but they are slipping back into old ideas and habits. Evidently they still do not know God well enough.

One of the saddest passages in the Bible comes from Matthew's gospel and is part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Jesus said, *“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he 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 perform many miracles? (In other words, didn't we do some good things and say the right things?) Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers,”* (Matthew 7:21-23).

Jesus is all about relationships. His goal is to have a real, personal and intimate relationship with his sons and daughters. It begins with belief. It begins with believing that he exists. It begins with believing in him. But a relationship has to go beyond that. It has to become a relationship of knowing him and him knowing us.

I know it is not easy for a church to receive a new pastor. It is a hard adjustment for everyone. When we first came here six years ago, we were warmly received and welcomed. And then we began to build a relationship. Relationships take work. They take time. But I was surprised when a couple of years after we had been here I kept hearing a few people say, “We really don't know you.”

I know there are all different kinds of knowing someone. There are certainly people that definitely don't know me. When they call me on the phone and they call me Mr. Keys, I definitely know they don't know me. They don't even know my name. And there are people that know I work at the church, but they say something like, “Now what do you do at the church? Are you one of the pastors?” They don't know me either. There are people who call me “Pastor Mark,” and maybe they just know that I preach and do funerals and weddings and write something on the front of the bulletin, but that's about all they know about me. They know some about me, but they don't really know me.

There are those who call me Mark and we do things together. Maybe we play tennis together or have been on trips together. They know me a little better. There are those who knew me in high school or college. They knew me then. They don't really know me now. I'm not the same person I was then. And then there are those who know me as "Dad" and my wife who knows me as "husband". They have spent twenty some years living in the same house with me and experiencing life with me in all the seasons of life, good times and not-so-good times. They know my good habits and my bad habits. They know me really well!

In the same way, there are many different ways we "know" God. We might know God by reputation. We may know God by what we have heard about him. We have been told God is this and God is that. You may have even gathered quite a bit of facts about God from going to Sunday School or Church. Craig Groeschel told about how he was a big fan of George Brett, the legendary third baseman for the Kansas City Royals. Craig grew up in Kansas City and collected every George Brett baseball card that was ever made. He could tell you every fact there was about his career as a baseball player. And he knew some about him as a person as well. One day he even ran into him at an outdoor café. He introduced himself and spouted off some facts he knew about him. Brett even invited him to sit down and they visited for a few minutes. And then he left. And Craig asked the question, "Did I really know George Brett? No, not at all." Craig could say he knew a lot about him. He could say he had even met him. But he really didn't know him, because he didn't have a relationship with him.

For some of us our relationship with God is only secondhand. For others of us, our relationship is based on a past relationship, past memories. We remember a time in our life when we felt close to God. We remember a time in our life when we were in a worship service or on a retreat or camp or mission trip or something. Maybe we felt close to God when we were in a youth group many years ago. We have memories of God from long ago. But like the friends we had growing up, we have lost touch. We knew him many years ago. We can't say we know him now.

When people say they don't feel like they know me, I realize that may be my fault. Maybe I haven't disclosed myself, my feelings, my thoughts, my passions, my convictions, or my beliefs well enough. But maybe it is their fault. You have to spend time with a person to get to know them. But at least the desire is there. When people say that they don't know me, it means that they want to know me better. At least I think it does! And if so, I am grateful for that.

It is the same way with our relationship with God. It has to begin with the desire. We have to want to know him. It has to become something we are willing to invest in and go after. I am absolutely sure that God doesn't have any trouble revealing himself to us. God is more than willing to reveal himself to us. One of the ways he reveals himself to us is through the Bible. Another way is through his many names. The names of God reveal many different characteristics of God to us. And sometimes we get to know God through experiences we go through. Maybe you have experienced a healing in your life and you learn that God is *Jehovah Rophe*, or healer. Maybe you have experienced God's power

or provision in your life and you have come to know God as *Jehovah Jireh*, “Our God is powerful,” or “Our God is our Provider”. Maybe you have experienced God’s love and you have come to know God as *Jehovah Nissi*, “His banner over us is love”. There are many names for God: *Jehovah Tsidkenu*, “Our God is Righteous” (holy, pure). *Jehovah Roi*, “The Lord is our Shepherd”, *Jehovah Shalom*, He is the God of Peace. *Jehovah Adonai*, “He is the Lord, over all, higher than any other god. *Jehovah Yahweh*, “The God who Is.”

David wrote a Psalm many years ago that captures the essence of knowing God intimately and how one might go about doing that. Listen to the words of Psalm 63:
“*O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; (that means if we want to know God personally and intimately, we have to go after God; we seek Him out; we pursue a personal relationship); my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water (that speaks of a desire for the relationship, you have to want to have one). I have seen you in the sanctuary and beheld your power and your glory (it doesn’t have to happen there or begin there, in the sanctuary, in worship, but it certainly can and there will be those times when a presence happens). Because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you. I will praise you as long as I live, and in your name I will lift up my hands (as we begin to experience God’s presence, and his love, we respond; we respond in song and praise and worship). My soul will be satisfied as with the richest of foods; with singing lips my mouth will praise you. On my bed I remember you; I think of you through the watches of the night (a relationship with God is a continuous experience; you don’t go awhile and then stop, daily, nightly, we think about him, reflect on him, pray to him, listen to him, let him speak to us). Because you are my help, I sing in the shadow of your wings. My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me,*” (Psalm 63:1-8).

So church, here is the deal. It is time to be honest with ourselves and with God. Do you know him? If you do, do you know him well? If you don’t, don’t feel alone. I have been there. And so has everyone. The great thing is, you can know God. And if you used to be close and now you aren’t, you can be close again. Getting to know God and getting close to God is not hard. It isn’t about a bunch of rules. God does want our obedience. But mostly he wants our hearts. Again and again, he says, “If you seek me, you will find me.” The Bible says, “*But if from there you seek the Lord your God, you will find him if you look for him with all your heart and with all your soul,*” (Deuteronomy 4:29). Jesus said, “*Ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened,*” (Matthew 7:7-8).

This is a great time for you to begin the journey of a personal relationship with God. Know that he has nothing but love for you. And his desire is to have this personal relationship with you that will absolutely bless you in every way. It is a relationship that will turn your worry and fear into trust and peace and grace. It is a relationship that will change you from living for yourself to living for him. It is a relationship that will change your heart and make you want to serve him and follow him.

Just simply tell him what is on your mind. Tell him you are ready. Tell him you are ready to live for him and follow him and that you want to know him personally. And then give him the reins.

Let's pray: O God, we really don't want to be Christian atheists. We don't want to say or claim to believe in you and then live as though you don't exist. As David prayed, "O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you." Lord, we confess you as our Lord and Savior. And we want to experience a deep, personal relationship with you. Show us how to do that. As the deer pants for water, so may our souls pant for you. Give us a deep desire and commitment to seek you with our whole hearts. Amen.