

LESSON 4B – Understanding Atheists (Part 2)

(based on pp. 71-147)



Atheists are moral people who are true to themselves and constantly work for a better society and world

1. Based on the following quotations, make two lists: one of what an atheist would say is moral and the other immoral. What can we of Christians approve of?

An atheist believes that a hospital should be built instead of a church. An atheist believes that a deed must be done instead of a prayer said. An atheist strives for involvement in life and not escape into death. He wants disease conquered, poverty vanquished, war eliminated.

—Madalyn Murray O'Hair
Life
Quick to Listen, p. 111

In the United States, for example, public policies driven by people who pretend to know things they don't know [that is, people of faith] continue to hurt people: abstinence-only sex education, prohibitions against gay marriage, bans on death with dignity, corporal punishment in schools, failure to fund international family planning organizations, and promoting the teaching of Creationism and other pseudosciences are but a few of the many misguided conclusions wrought by irrationality.

—Peter Boghossian
A Manual for Creating Atheists
Quick to Listen, p. 122

I think there's a lot of damage that happens in self-doubt and guilt and shame over things that I think are just human.

—Ezra
Quick to Listen, p. 77

MORAL | **IMMORAL**

2. Upon receiving such assertions, how might we invite an atheist to discuss about what is true, loving, and good?
3. Jesus uses one word to summarize the Ten Commandments—*love*. What is this love?

Mark 12:28-31 One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?” “The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”

4. How are we being loveless toward ourselves whenever we sin?

John 8:34 Jesus replied, “I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin.”

Psalms 32:3-4 When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer.

Luke 22:59-62 About an hour later another asserted, “Certainly this fellow was with him, for he is a Galilean.” Peter replied, “Man, I don’t know what you’re talking about!” Just as he was speaking, the rooster crowed. The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him: “Before the rooster crows today, you will disown me three times.” ⁶² And he went outside and wept bitterly.

Matthew 18:6 “If anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.”

2 Corinthians 5:10 For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.

5. Why is it ironic that there are calls for justice all around—from news, media, celebrities, and academia, yet many of the same deny the existence of hell?

6. How do the following passages demonstrate that because Christ forgives us and frees us from our sins, we can be a true blessing to everyone around us?

2 Corinthians 5:17-21 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

1 John 1:8–2:2 If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives. My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.

Galatians 5:22-24 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires.

7. Sometimes (perhaps more and more) our attempts to share the love of Christ are met with opposition. What encouragements do the following passages give?

Psalms 91:4-7 He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart. You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday. A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you.

1 Timothy 4:12 Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity.

Atheists believe in justice and mercy for all people

Atheists often accuse our God of being unjust and unmerciful. As evidence, they point to his Old Testament commands to wipe out nations or the arbitrary way he destined some for heaven and others for hell (a misunderstanding of the doctrine of election). In reality, nowhere do God's justice and mercy shine more brightly than in the doctrine of election, or predestination as it's sometimes called. We could argue that no doctrine offers greater certainty of God's eternal love for sinners than this one.

8. Imagine that an atheist friend calls your God unjust and unmerciful. How might the following passages guide your loving response?

Romans 6:23 The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 3:22b-24 There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

Acts 10:34-35 Then Peter began to speak: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.”

John 3:16 “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

1 Timothy 2:4 [God our Savior] wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.

Ezekiel 33:11 “Say to them, ‘As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live.’”

9. Since all people are equally sinful and stubborn to the things of God, on what basis did God choose his believers?

Ephesians 1:3-6 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.

10. Use the following passages to respond to an atheist, explaining how he or she might witness God’s justice and mercy today.

2 Peter 3:9 He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

Psalms 37:34-37 Wait for the Lord and keep his way. He will exalt you to inherit the land; when the wicked are cut off, you will see it. I have seen a wicked and ruthless man flourishing like a green tree in its native soil, but he soon passed away and was no more; though I looked for him, he could not be found. Consider the blameless, observe the upright; there is a future for the man of peace.

Closing Thought

We can agree with the atheists that justice and mercy are important. That’s the point. God looked down, saw the cause of injustice and evil, and intervened with a promise that gives hope and forgiveness, that encourages kindness and love. This is an excellent springboard for a discussion about the reason we have for the hope within us.

Next Time: Listening to Bible Skeptics