

Reason to Believe: Can We Be Good Without God?

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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1 John 4:7-17

Let's start by playing *Name That Tune*, shall we? Only it won't really be *Name That Tune*, it will be *Name That Lyric*. Can you identify the song that these lyrics come from? *'Imagine there's no heaven It's easy if you try. No hell below us. Above us only sky. Imagine all the people living for today. Imagine there's no countries. It isn't hard to do. Nothing to kill or die for. And no religion too. Imagine all the people living life in peace. You may say I'm a dreamer. But I'm not the only one. I hope someday you'll join us. And the world will be as one.'*

That's a pretty easy one. I'm sure many of you will have correctly identified the song. It's John Lennon's wildly popular song *Imagine*. Written in 1971, it's beloved by all sorts of people, including many Christians. Which is a little ironic, because Lennon intended the song to be anti-religious. The song wants us to imagine a world where everyone lives as one, and the song imagines that the obstacle to that sort of harmony is religious belief. Imagine no religion, it's easy if you try. Imagine there's no heaven, and then imagine all the people living live in peace. I'm not trying to get people to hate on John Lennon or the Beatles. I like the Beatles music. But there's no question that in this song John Lennon is saying that we would be better, more peaceful people without religion. Without the idea of God.

John Lennon is not alone in these views. In 2007 Christopher Hitchens wrote his book *God is not Great. How Religion Poisons Everything*. He spends the first 17 chapters of that book detailing all the terrible things that have been done in God's name through history, and then he spends the last three chapters suggesting that we would be better people if we gave up God. We would be more tolerant, more kind and generally better behaved. It was a very popular book. Unfortunately, over the years, Christians and other religious believers have given people like Lennon and Hitchens lots of ammunition for their writing. The religious wars of Europe killed thousands, the crusades were a disaster, slavers used the Bible to justify their trade, and 9-11 and the atrocities of the Islamic State and Boko Haram show us the terrible power of religious fanaticism to turn people into killers.

There is no question that bad religion causes a lot of trouble. The religious impulse is a powerful impulse. As I said in the first sermon of this series, we are fundamentally religious creatures, we have a strong drive for purpose and meaning. God put eternity in our hearts and that religious sense drives us forward. But when we drive towards the wrong thing, when we twist the true message of God and worship a god of our own making, all the power from that impulse gets channeled in ways that create mayhem. They fly jet planes into buildings, they slaughter Jews in pogroms. Terrible things have been done in the name of bad religion. But does that mean human beings would be more moral without God? Would people live their life in peace if there was no religion? Can people be good without God?

Now, on one level the answer to this question is, *"Of course people can be good without God!"* The world is full of good, kind and generous people who aren't particularly religious. All over the world, there are atheists who love their children, look in on their neighbors, and show kindness to those in need. So of course you *can* be good without God. The deeper question is; can you *sustain* a moral life on the foundation of unbelief? Can kindness and goodness continue to grow in the soil of secularism and atheism? When atheists are good and kind, where does their

goodness and their kindness come from? Is their goodness and kindness a fruit of their unbelief? Does goodness and kindness grow in the soil of atheism? OR are the good, kind and loving atheists borrowing their fruit from a different tree planted in different soil. Is the goodness growing in their own garden, or are they buying it at the farmer's market from a different producer?

Let's think about that. If a completely secular person wanted to grow moral fruit, what kind of soil would they be planting in? Last week, you may remember that Ruth read a quote from a public atheist named Jennifer Hecht. Her quote is a pretty good description of the soil in the garden of atheism. "The universe is nothing but an accidental pile of stuff, jostling around with no rhyme nor reason, and all life on earth is but a tiny, inconsequential speck of nothing, in a corner of space, existing in the blink of an eye never to be judged, noticed or remembered."

Now, if that's the soil of your life-life is an accident, it has no purpose, it is inconsequential-what kind of moral tree grows out of that? Will it be a tree of love and kindness and self-sacrifice? Not likely. If you believe that the world is an accidental pile of stuff, if you believe that the only goal of life is survival, if you believe that history is nothing but is the story of strong species triumphing over weak species in a long process of natural selection, how does goodness or kindness or generosity hope to put down roots in that kind of soil? That soil has no nutrients for goodness, for kindness for generosity. There is no good or evil in that kind of garden; there is only survival and self-interest.

Fortunately, many unbelievers do have a strong sense of right and wrong. Many atheists work hard for causes that they think are good. They are passionate about human rights. They will speak out against racial injustice. They give to charity. Let's be thankful for that. *But why should they think these things are good.* Why should humans have rights? Why is it better to treat women as full human beings instead of treating them like property? Why is slavery wrong? In fact, if I can enslave the neighboring tribe in a way that enriches my tribe and increases my chance of survival, wouldn't that be a good thing? Unbelievers may value the fruits of kindness and love, and they may love human rights, but I would humbly suggest that they are getting their fruit from another garden. They are borrowing from God's garden. Human rights comes from the idea that all humans are made in the image of God and that's a Biblical idea. The soil of atheism doesn't have the nutrients for the values they want to hold.

Christopher Hitchens used to get angry when people said you needed God for morality. I watched an interview he did back in 2007 at Stanford University. He said, 'It's insulting to say we atheists need God to be good. We know the difference between good and bad. We know it's wrong to murder, and wrong to abuse. We don't need God to tell us right and wrong because we all know it in here. Morality is innate. Every human being just knows these things!'

But do we? We think slavery is wrong, but there are lots of societies that believed slavery was just fine. They looked inside their hearts and said, 'Owning another person is no big deal!' The ancient Romans used to practice exposure. If the man of the household, the paterfamilias, didn't want a child after it was born, they'd abandon it in the wild and let it die. Andy Stanley quotes a letter from a Roman soldier to his wife: "*I am still in Alexandria...I beg and plead with you to take care of our little child, and as soon as we receive wages, I will send them to you. In the meantime, if (good fortune to you!), you give birth, if it's a boy, let it live. If it is a girl, expose it.*" Hi hon! Love you! Miss you! Oh by the way, if the baby's a girl, expose it, will you? Our inner sense is not reliable. Our hearts can learn to accept abominable things. Hitchens is wrong. We can't sustain goodness just by looking in our hearts.

So that's the soil of atheism and secularism. What about the soil of Christian faith? That's what 1 John 4 tells us. The Christian moral life plants itself in the God's garden, and our passage describes that garden. What kind of an ecosystem is God's garden? In these 5 verses John takes us on a tour of God's garden and shows us the ecology of the place.

What kind of fruit grows in this garden? Love. *"Dear friends let us love each other."* We are called to love one another. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul and all your strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. Love is the center of our ecosystem. When a stranger strolls into God's garden, the first thing they should sense is that this is a place where love flourishes. The aroma of it should be all around. The fruit of it is heavy on the branches.

Where does this love come from? In what soil is it planted? *"Dear friends, let us love each other for love comes from God."* Our love and our goodness does not come from ourselves, it sprouts from the fertile ground of God's love. We don't create love from our will, we don't find it by looking in our hearts, we love because He first loved us. Love grows in us as a gift from Him. We are planted in Christ. Our roots go down into His stream. And His Spirit fills us and produces His fruit in us. What kind of love are we talking about? When we are planted in Christ, what kind of goodness, what kind of love, what kind of life flows up into us? John tells us that too. *"This is love, not that we loved God, but He loved us and gave His son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins."* God's love looks like a man dying on a cross, laying down His life for not very nice people so that they could be saved. This isn't just any old love. It's particularly deep. Often when secular people talk about getting rid of religion they imagine certain virtues will spring up. We will become more tolerant. We will become less judgmental. I'm not sure that's true. But even if it were, tolerance is not a very hearty fruit. It's important. Tolerance is definitely a virtue. But on its own, it's not nearly sufficient to create a robust moral life. There's not a lot of nutrients in it. Tolerance gives room to other people to do their thing, and that's fine, but it doesn't create anything. It turns over the spoil and loosens it up, but it doesn't fertilize or water or sow. It's a passive virtue.

The love that flows into us through Christ's death and resurrection isn't passive. It moves towards sin and forgives it. It moves towards shame and says, 'you are my beloved child.' It moves towards fear and says, 'don't worry I'm right here'. It uproots pride and plants humility. It uproots greed and replaces it with generosity. This is a love strong enough to make you a new person from the inside out. When the Spirit sows this love in you, you are not just tolerant of your neighbor, you are willing to bleed for him, you are willing to sacrifice for her. This is a different sort of love that God plants in His garden.

I said earlier that in Roman times, exposure of unwanted babies was a common and accepted practice. But that changed because of Christians. Planted in the soil of Jesus who cared for the weak and welcomed little children, Christians refused to practice exposure. Not only that, they began to rescue exposed babies and adopted them into their homes. The pagans noticed. They saw this new plant growing up in their midst. This new kind of love growing up from a new kind of soil. What kind of love is this? Where did it come from? It changed them. By the fourth century exposure was illegal in Rome.

This is a series on Apologetics and I've just finished a sermon in which I made some intellectual and philosophical arguments for why goodness will not grow properly in atheism's soil. But what I don't want you to do as a result of this sermon is to go find your atheist friend your agnostic neighbor and try to tell him that his philosophy can't produce morality. I don't think badgering argument will win your neighbor's heart. That last story, the one about the early church and exposure, suggests a different strategy. Let cross-shaped love be your apologetic. Let

the aroma of Christ's love, let the fruit of Christ's Spirit be so strong in you that people see the possibility of a new kind of life. Let your love be your argument. Who was the most powerful apologist of the 20th century? Maybe C.S. Lewis. That's probably the name that most quickly comes to mind for most. But I think you could make an argument that it was Mother Theresa. Mother Theresa was no philosopher. She was no professional theologian. She was a nun who showed the kind of love that only grows in God's garden. She cared for the poorest of the poor in Calcutta. Diseased beggars who would have otherwise died alone in the gutters were brought into her mission, treated with dignity, shown love and care. They were shown a kind of love that was clearly completely sacrificial. There was no self-interest. It was cross-shaped love. And when the people of the world saw this woman and her fellow workers doing this, they were all drawn to it. What's behind that kind of sacrifice? Where does that come from? I've never seen a love quite like that! It's beautiful. Whose love is that? It's Jesus' love. It's His love springing up from God's garden showing His face to the world. *"No one has ever seen God,"* says John, *"but when we love each other God lives in us and his love his made complete in us."*

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