

How to Love an Atheist

A former atheist shares 5 compelling principles

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*Truth was dead.
God had never lived.
Life was filled of pain.
And death was the end of life.¹*

These beliefs formed my worldview as a young atheist: I sincerely believed that there was no God. When people hear my story, they often tell theirs with something close to agony in their eyes: a son, a daughter, a brother, a mother, a spouse, a colleague—someone they love denies God’s existence. “Your journey from atheism to faith,” they whisper, “gives me *hope* that one day they will know God.”

Hope and atheism? Yes, indeed! When you love an atheist, you have great reason to hope. Their words may wound you. Their actions may confuse you. But the God in whom you hope is mighty to save and relentless in his loving pursuit of their souls. To complement your prayers for their salvation, I offer you five “Be’s” for those who love atheists.

1. Be Respectful: People Rarely Choose Atheism Lightly

I like atheists. Without exception I have enjoyed the company of every *authentic* atheist I have met. (*Authentic*, however, is a key adjective because occasionally pretenders don the cloak of atheism to satisfy their addiction to arguing, and I have a painfully low

tolerance for posers of any variety.) In general, atheists are thoughtful, witty, and deeply committed to their perceptions of reality.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, *respect* means “consideration” and “regard,” not agreement. Respect invites us to remember that people have a reason for what they believe. Some inherit atheism from their families or cultures. Some turn to atheism to make sense of the planet’s insanely inequitable distribution of health, wealth, and safety. Some choose atheism for scientific or (like I did) philosophical reasons. And some default to the belief in the wake of painful disillusionment with God and his people. Reasons matter. In fact, *what* your loved one believes is simply the outcome of *why* they believe. Like a good doctor, instead of being distracted and distraught by the fruits of their beliefs, focus on discerning the roots of their beliefs. Respectful listening can reveal root causes, and root causes can give us specific direction for intercession. So as Peter advised, “If someone asks about your hope as a believer, always be ready to explain it. But do this in a gentle and respectful way” (1 Peter 3:15–16).

2. Be Humble: An Honest "I Don't Know" Inspires Trust

How lovely it would be if all we had to do to win a debate with an atheist was utter truth and, regardless of our eloquence, our loved one would offer a sigh of relief, say, “Ah, there it is,” and run into the arms of Jesus! Human debates, however, are won more by skill than by truth. If you find yourself mismatched in skill with an atheist, all is not lost: humility can still win their trust.

As a young atheist, my response to Christian friends’ attempts to “give an answer” ranged from mild amusement to bewildered annoyance. Our discussions would end in debate, and our debates would end in their tears. Then they would utter these weighty words: “We don’t know, Alicia. We don’t have an answer. But we do know that Jesus lives and that he loves you.”

“I don’t know” is a surprisingly smart answer when it is true. And believing when we do not have all the answers is a decent working definition of *faith* ([Hebrew 11:1](#)). My friends’ faith, far more than their “answers,” made it past my mind and stirred my spirit.

3. Be Encouraged: Unbelief Does Not Alter God

Unlike fictional Santas and fairies that lose their power when humanity’s believe-o-meters run low, God’s existence is neither strengthened by belief nor weakened by unbelief. God is prior. In other words, his existence precedes ours.

Our greatest shout cannot thicken his presence, and our greatest doubt cannot thin his presence. Your loved one’s unbelief does not offend God: he still is and he still loves.

A secular radio station host once asked me if a certain ridiculously heretical best-seller made me nervous. “God’s not nervous about this book,” I replied. “So I’m having a hard time figuring out why I should be nervous.” Your loved one’s unbelief does not make

God nervous. He is, after all, rather secure. Take heart, for God specializes in the pursuit of stubborn souls:

“I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me;
I was found by those who did not seek me.
To a nation that did not call on my name,
I said, ‘Here am I, here am I.’” (Isaiah 65:1, NIV)

4. Be Teachable: Learn from Them

Your loved one’s atheism cannot void the fact that they are gloriously covered with God’s fingerprints. Their very existence bears his signature. They are “formed by [his] hands” ([Isaiah 64:8](#)). I believe that we can learn from everyone (and everything) God created. What is their strength? What is their hobby? What is their skill? Ask earnest questions about it—then listen and learn.

Why? Because being teachable is a practical application of being respectful and humble. Because honoring others’ strengths honors their Creator. Because listening is a form of love, and love penetrates skepticism at depths debate can only dream of. Because learning from others opens the door for them to learn from you. Being genuinely teachable is surprisingly disarming.

5. Be Present: Christ Is Within You

Whether by phone or in person, whether by email or over dinner, when your loved one is near you, they are near Jesus. By a mystery we can only faintly comprehend, Jesus takes up residence in his followers. As Paul said, “Christ lives in you” ([Colossians 1:27](#)). Astounding!

Though as a young atheist my Christian friends’ buoyant beliefs were irritating, their presence was soothing. I liked being near them. Only later did I realize that the peace I felt was the Prince of Peace within them. At the end of the day, all their well-intended explanations paled in comparison with the gift they gave to me: the present of presence. They were close enough, long enough, that because God is, his reality echoed through their humanity and something deep within me began to awaken.²

The Rest of the Story

People often ask if my God-encounter resolved all my philosophical angst. In a word: no. I still have questions, but now I ask them looking into God’s eyes. Occasionally, I stumble upon a partial answer. But always, I find myself walking more closely with the God who mentors my mind. The goal of faith was never answers. The goal of faith is intimacy with Jesus—our near-yet-infinite, timeless-yet-ever-new treasure.

And now for the rest of the story:

“God is,” I realized. My worldview was irreparably altered.

I had never considered myself a prisoner, but instantly I knew that I was free. I had never considered myself dead, but now I knew that I was alive. The encounter was depositing within me a gift: faith—a living, growing substance not made by human hands. Escorted by faith, I entered an indescribably beautiful, stunningly satisfying, adventure-filled mystery:

*Truth is not dead.
God has always lived.
Life is full of pain.
Death is but a door.
And the God who is, aches to love us.³*

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¹ *Alicia Britt Chole, Finding an Unseen God: Reflections of a Former Atheist (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2009), 11–13.*

² *Chole, Finding an Unseen God, 145.*

³ *Chole, Finding an Unseen God, 164.*