

What Do You Believe?

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[0 : 00] This number of graduates is the largest we've had in several years. When I first saw the list, I started thinking about what many Christian leaders have been saying for the past 15 years or so about the religious beliefs of most high school students in this country.

And as I'm going to mention a little bit later on, what we're going to look at is the predominant view of adults in this country as well.

What we're going to see is disturbing. About three years ago, I preached a message that described these beliefs of Americans in general now under the heading moralistic therapeutic deism.

If you remember that, would you raise your hand? Okay, there's a few. Good. Maybe it's not so good that more hands didn't go up, but I'm going to look on the positive side.

This phrase, moralistic therapeutic deism, was coined by a sociologist, Christian Smith, from the University of North Carolina.

[1 : 15] In 2005, or their research was compiled and published in 2005, after they had conducted over 3,000 interviews with American teenagers between the ages of 13 and 17.

Now, in doing this research, listening to these young people explain what they believe or didn't believe, Christian Smith and his team of researchers came up with what they call the mainstream belief system of American teenagers.

This is not describing any denomination, any particular group. It's just what they came up with after all these interviews, and they call it the mainstream belief system of American teenagers.

Here are the five statements that describe those beliefs. Number one, a God, little g, exists, who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth.

Number two, God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions. Number three, the central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.

[2 : 33] Number four, God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem. Number five, good people go to heaven when they die.

Now, here's one summary statement of those five points. God exists to meet my needs and help me be a nice person who feels good about myself.

When I put that list of one through five on the screen, some of you probably scratched your head and thought, what's wrong with that? I hope this summary statement helps you to see what's wrong with that.

Now, do you know where Smith and his team said that teenagers learned these beliefs? They learned these beliefs from their parents and their churches.

But they explained it was not that their parents actually taught these things. It was not that any church had this as a part of their basic doctrine.

[3 : 45] They said it's what they saw. What they saw in their parents. Just how little their parents actually believed and put into practice in their daily lives.

And concerning the church, they observed how their churches had tried to blend in with the culture of the world. And so, these young people, not just yes and no answers, but in discussing their beliefs, what they had heard, what they had seen, as they put it all together.

They came up with this moralistic, therapeutic deism as being the predominant belief system of American teenagers and American adults.

That's one thing that I'll follow up to these studies. Many Christian leaders have pointed out, pointed to a lot of different evidences. That this is the predominant view of Americans today.

And disturbingly, a lot of people in churches, a lot of professing Christians think this way, believe this way as well. But what I want us to look at this morning is, this is a belief system that is not found in Scripture.

[5 : 08] And if it's not found in Scripture, it cannot be true. I think this is something worthy of us interrupting our series on the family to pay close attention this morning.

I want us, as we go through this message, to... I've got... let me put it this way. I've got three reasons for this message. Number one, I want to make sure that no one here believes this false teaching.

I want to make sure that you, when you leave here as high school graduates going off somewhere, you didn't hear this garbage from this pulpit. You didn't hear it anywhere in our church, many of our other pastors, Sunday school teachers.

And I don't think you heard it from any parent. But I want to make sure this morning that no one believes the kind of things that I've mentioned and will look at.

Number two, every Christian needs to be aware of this and be able to spot this false teaching. Don't be misled by it. Number three, every parent, grandparent, and Sunday school teacher needs to make sure that you don't unintentionally teach it by your words or your actions.

[6 : 29] This is needed. I've been a pastor for a long time now. I've been around a lot of Christians in a lot of churches. And including our own church from time to time. I hear church members say things along the line of, I hope I'm good enough to get into heaven.

I even heard it said one time by one person, I think I've earned my place in heaven. I'm not exaggerating.

Church people, people who attend Pickens First Baptist Church, sometimes think this way and make statements like this.

We need to hear this. We need to be clear. Let's start. Number one, the Bible does not teach the moralistic idea that God simply wants us to be good.

The Christian faith is about much more than helping people be good. The false teaching of moralism says this.

[7 : 39] I'm going to use the survey of Smith's five statements here. Number two, God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.

Number five, good people go to heaven when they die. The Bible does not teach that. Now, I'm sure some of you say and scratch your head and said, are we not supposed to be good?

Obviously, we need to be as good as we can. The gospel of Jesus Christ does come with moral commands and expectations.

The problem is, we can't be good on our own. We can never be good enough for God to accept us as his children just by the way that we live.

The Bible clearly teaches that we cannot live a morally pure or upright life on our own. The first point of the gospel is that we are sinners by nature and by choice.

[8 : 46] We naturally choose to live life our way, my way, as opposed to God's way. Children are the best examples of this.

You know, I think about when I try to explain this point, there's no better way to explain it than to say, look at children. No one teaches their child to disobey their parent. Nobody in their right mind will teach their child to disobey their parent.

No one teaches a child to be just selfish, to take things away from another child, to hit another child over the head with their toy in the nursery, even in church. No one has to teach a child how to tell a lie to avoid being punished.

Children just are born into this world with a sinful nature, with a tendency, look out for me. And as they grow and mature, can make their own decisions, even as little fellas all the way up, you see that they choose to be selfish.

Now, the idea that everyone is a sinner before God does not mean that everyone is purely evil. Some people mistakenly think that when the Bible talks about we've all sinned, come short of the glory of God, some people have the idea that the Bible is saying we're all just purely evil people.

[10 : 13] That is not what it means when the Bible talks about sin in our lives. Everyone is created in the image of God. Every human being is created in the image of God.

And we have an inner sense of right and wrong. Some people refer to it as the conscience. The Apostle Paul talks about it in Romans chapter 2. God has put it within us.

This basic moral law. This basic understanding of what is right and what is wrong. And here's how it comes out. Let's go back to children. Some children are more compliant than others.

If you've got more than one child, probably you had one that you could just sort of look at. He or she would straighten up. Or you could have had two like me that you had to horse whip to get their attention to make them do anything.

Now, for any liberals to worry about that, I'm just, I'm joking. I did whip them, spank them. I would do it again if they needed it. If they were little, I'm talking about. They could whip me now, size-wise.

[11 : 22] But you know what I'm talking about. Adults are the same way. Some people in this room just do more what's good and kind.

Some people just are more self-giving than others by nature. It's not because they're Christians. So, just look around.

In your family, among your friends, there are varying degrees of goodness and evil. The problem that the gospel addresses is that we're sinners who cannot be good as God defines goodness.

And that's the point. Some of us are good in comparison to others. But we cannot be good as God defines goodness because God's standard is perfection.

We're talking about almighty God, holy God. His standard is perfection. If we want to be good or do what is right in a way that pleases God on our own, we've got to be perfect.

[12 : 31] Let me show you a verse of scripture that makes this real clear. James is writing a letter to Christians. He's trying to help them understand they cannot earn their salvation by their good works.

He says, for whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. You might be a very good person and you know what the scripture teaches about how you ought to live.

And for the most part, you do that. You're conscientiously doing that. But are you perfect? If you ever break one of God's commands, you are guilty of being a lawbreaker before God.

So even the best person you know is not perfect. Well, therefore, we all stand before God as sinners, guilty of breaking God's laws, not living up to his standards of perfection.

Listen, that's where we all are. That's how we enter the world. That's how we are as we grow up and make choices. Well, the penalty for our sin, the scripture says, is death, which ultimately means eternal separation from God in hell.

[13 : 50] This is the bad news of the Bible. You know something? The Bible clearly presents this. The Bible writers, they care enough about human beings to tell the truth.

This is a reality. We're born with a sinful nature. We make sinful choices. The penalty for sin is death. And that's all of us. And that's the bad news of the Bible that we all need to listen, understand, accept.

You cannot wish it away. The good news is that God loves us. And he has provided a way for us to be forgiven of our sins.

He's provided a way for us not only to be forgiven, but to actually become his children. And when we're forgiven, we become his children.

He puts his spirit in us and that's how we are able to live a morally pure life that will please God and be satisfying to us.

[15 : 04] Here's what God has done more specifically. God sent his son Jesus into this world for the purpose of saving us. Jesus lived a perfect, morally pure life throughout his time here on earth.

He lived the perfect life that we couldn't live. And then Jesus died on the cross as our substitute according to the plan of God to pay the penalty for our sins.

He died in our place, suffered the punishment that we deserve so that we wouldn't have to experience that punishment. And then God raised Jesus from the dead to prove he's accepted Jesus' sacrifice.

That Jesus is who he said he was. He did what he said he came to do. He came back to live. He's alive today in heaven. One day he'll come back to this world the scripture tells us. Now, this is the basic gospel good news of God message from the Bible.

But that's not all the Bible says about our relationship with God, being right with God. We've got to respond to this gospel. We've got to respond to what Christ has done for us in order to experience God's gracious salvation.

[16 : 23] The apostle Paul summarized it like this. He was talking about how he had traveled the world and what he had been preaching. He says, I have declared to both Jews and Greeks and in his mind that's everybody.

There's two kinds of people in the world. There's Jews and Greeks. I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus. Paul is saying that the way of salvation is open to anyone who will repent of their sin.

Admit that you have failed God. Change your mind about living your selfish way, your disobedient way. Sort of like you make a debut face.

You turn from your sin and you put your trust in Jesus as your Savior and your Lord. We're not talking about just believing the Bible.

Most people in this room, I'm going to guess, you believe John 3.16. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him will not perish, but have eternal life.

[17 : 32] Most people in this room, you believe. That's in the Bible. I believe it. But do you believe it just like you believe a lot of facts that you read in history books? Or do you believe in this Jesus, this son of God, personally, that he died for you to pay the penalty for your sin?

Are you trusting him, counting on him, depending on him to be right with God? Are you truly honoring him as the Lord of your life, the ultimate leader of your life?

When we choose to live life God's way, when we choose to trust Christ, to follow him, listen to this, the Spirit of God lives in us, and he gives us the desire and the ability to live that morally good life that pleases God.

Look at this passage of Scripture. Paul writes, to a church, therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence, but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Paul is writing to Christians, people who are trusting in Jesus. This is his way of telling them, now you need to grow, you need to mature, you need to become more like Jesus. And the way that happens is, it's not that you try to be good.

[19 : 07] It's not that you try to do your best to just do this or that. The idea is, if you're a Christian, the Spirit of God lives within you, and he works in you to give you the desire to please God, to obey him.

He gives you the ability to act on that desire to live this morally pure life. Do you see evidence in your life that you are a Christian based on what the scripture says that a Christian is?

If we're really God's children, it will show, it will show in the way that we love him, the way that we obey him, the way that we are developing Christ-like character, the way that we're treating the people that we live with, that we interact with every day.

Following Jesus will lead us to develop a loving relationship with our Heavenly Father. Real followers of Jesus have a desire to know God better by reading his word, listening to God speak through his word.

Real followers of Jesus have a desire to have a real relationship with God as their Heavenly Father, and we want to talk to him. That's what prayer is, talking to God. Once we know how to please God by spending time with him in his word and prayer, once we know how to please God, the Holy Spirit will give us those desires and abilities to do it.

[20 : 46] Now, the Bible does not teach this moralistic idea that all we need to do is just try to be good. And if we do our best to be good and we do more good than bad, we go to heaven when we die.

That is a lie. There is nothing in the Bible that even implies some kind of teaching like that. So I want to ask you, are you a Christian?

Why would you say that? Are you trusting Christ and him alone as your Savior? Have you and are you still turning from sin as just a way of life?

Are you seeking, do you have the desire to be more and more like Jesus? To please God more and more by discovering how he wants you to live and then living that way?

Do you have the desires within you that come from the Spirit of God who indwells you when God saves you? Number two, the Bible does not teach the therapeutic idea that our major problem is low self-esteem and that God's main concern is to make us feel better about ourselves.

[21 : 57] This therapeutic teaching, number three, the central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself. Now, everybody wants to be happy.

Everybody wants to feel good about themselves. Problem is, we decide the best way to make us happy and feel good about ourselves. The problem is we put ourself at the center of life.

That's the problem. In today's therapeutic age, human problems are identified as anything and everything except the result of our sinful choices.

Solutions are identified today in terms of treatment plans and self-help programs. But rarely do you hear people talking today about the problem comes from my sinful choices and I need to repent.

I need to change the way that I am choosing to respond to the truth of God's word. Now, let me say this. For sure, every problem we deal with is not a sin problem.

[23 : 10] It is not. There are some personal issues. There are some relational issues, emotional issues. It would do a lot of people good to talk to a true, trained, biblically sound counselor.

It's like you go to a doctor, physical doctor, MD for a health problem, physical health. There's people that could help you with some issues if you give them the opportunity.

Every problem is not a sin problem. Hear me say that. But many of the problems we deal with are a direct result of our sinful choices.

And when that's the case, we'll never find answers when we ignore or deny our responsibility for our sinful choices. Let me give you an example. The last two weeks we've been talking about marriage.

We've been talking about God's design for marriage. Let's just say Genesis 2, 24 right now. It's God's intent for a married couple to leave their parents, be united to one another in a one flesh relationship.

[24 : 18] It may be that some of your marital problems are from your sinful choice of refusing to let go of your parents and make your spouse the number one person in your life, humanly speaking.

It may be the problem in your marriage is your sinful choice just to be a selfish person and expect your spouse to live for you, to please you, rather than you living for him or her to serve him or her.

as a part of your own life because you're that one flesh. The Bible has a lot to say about how we relate to self and most of it can be classified in terms of humbling ourselves, not exalting ourselves and denying ourselves, not indulging ourselves.

The Bible repeatedly calls us to guard against exalting ourselves by warning us against the sin of pride. Look quickly. Jesus made this clear. He says, for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.

Peter echoed this. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another. Stop. Just go back to marriage or just your home.

[25 : 43] Spouse, husband, wife relationships, parent, child relationships. Could it be that some of the tension, some of the hostility, some of the issues that you're dealing with in your home is because you're just a prideful person.

You expect everybody in the house to sit up and take notice and wait on you. It's all about me. Children think that. Parents think that. Some wives think that.

Some husbands think that. And that's the foundational problem. You're a prideful person. You're arrogant. Your spouse is supposed to serve you no matter what.

Your children are supposed to bow down to you no matter what. Or your parents are supposed to do whatever you want them to do no matter what. Peter says, clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another.

For God opposes the proud, but he gives grace to the humble. Our major problem is not low self-esteem.

[26 : 54] God's main concern is to not make us feel better about ourselves. That's heresy. That's in fact the opposite of what the scripture teaches.

Let's look at one more. The Bible does not teach deism, that God created the world, but does not remain actively involved in guiding everything according to his purpose. This moralistic therapeutic deism teaches that a God exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth.

Good, as far as it goes. But look at the next one, number four. God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.

For sake of time, I'm going to skip over the teaching that God is involved in every detail of life. That God is working out everything according to his eternal plan in your life, in this world, and everything.

I want to zero in on one major point that needs to be made about this last heretical idea. Look at it again. God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.

[28 : 05] That's like saying God is always there for me. Now I know as Christians we may not mean it to sound as bad as it does when we say well God's always there for me.

But let it sink in what you're saying if you really believe that. to think God's always there for me. As if he's on the side waiting like a bellhop.

That's one of the most blasphemous, God dishonoring, and personally arrogant statements a human being can make. I want you to look at what David Wells, a theologian, says about this.

He says God is not there to conform to us, we must conform to him. He summons us to know him. We are summoned to know him only on his terms.

He is not known on our terms. This summons is heard in and through his word. It is not heard through our intuitions. God is not there at our convenience or simply for our healings or simply as the divine teller handing out stuff from his bank.

[29 : 26] No, we are here for his service. We are here to know him as he is and not as we want him to be. God is not who you think he is or want him to be or imagine him to be.

God is as he is and he has revealed himself in his word. I think one of the best ways to describe this is like this. I'm a father of two sons.

I've got two little grandchildren. If my sons and my grandchildren never come around me, never call me, never have anything to do with me except when they get in a bind and then dad, bop, I'm going to resent it.

I'm going to see through it. They don't care about me. They care about what I can do for them. I want to tell you young people, graduates, don't go off to college and your parents never hear from you until you want something.

You're using them. You're abusing them. If I was them, I wouldn't be abused. It's dishonoring. It's disgraceful.

[30 : 52] That is how a lot of people and even some professing Christians treat God. He's on the sideline. He's there when I need him.

But there's no relationship. There's no ongoing fellowship. There's no talking to him, listening to him, no interaction with him, no concern about pleasing him until I need something.

If that's your relationship with God, you have no relationship with God. You are doing more to anger him, to dishonor him, to disrespect him than anything by that attitude.

Hear carefully this morning. The concept of moralistic therapeutic deism shows the shallowness of a American Christianity and it shows us there is a false gospel that many people have placed their hope in.

And my prayer is that there's no one here that is placing your hope in such a gospel. But if you realize you have, you are, admit it to God now.

[32 : 07] Admit that you've been abusing him, dishonoring him, that you've been trying to work your way to heaven or whatever it is. Confess your sin. Repent of your sin. Put your trust truly in Jesus as your Savior and Lord.

Seek to truly follow him, to please him, to serve him, to do his will. And you will find in, as Jesus said, if you'll lose your life for his sake, that's when you will really get the best life.

Because that will be God's will, God's way. That's the way you'll most honor God and please him. That's the way you'll most impact other people in the right kind of way.

And if you really want to feel the best about yourself, live life God's way. Humbling yourself, loving him, loving others, serving him, serving others.

And you can feel good about that kind of God honoring, Christ following self. Let's pray together.

[33 : 21] Lord, show each of us how we should respond right now. Father, help us to not be mistaken in thinking that somehow or another, if we just do more good than bad, you'll accept us in heaven one day or that we can have a good relationship with you now.

Help us to see and admit our sinfulness, the fact that we don't deserve a relationship with you, but that by your love and grace and mercy, you provide it through faith in Jesus.

Lord, show every person in this room how they should respond to this message. For some, dear God, show them they need to thank their parents for being faithful to the truth of your word and guiding them in the right way.

Or they need to be thankful to their Sunday school teacher or some other teacher. show us how we should respond. Help us to do that.

And then an attitude of prayer, let's just do what God tells us to do. The heads bowed, eyes closed. If you'd like, I'd be happy to pray with you here in front of this room here in the next few minutes.

[34 : 42] Matthew 16. Until post time. Yeah. Incauchen. Hayesz.