

The Religion of Good People (The Nones / Agnostics)

Phil EuBank · Let's Be Honest · Ecclesiastes 7:2; Mark 10:17-22; Matthew 7:21-23; Genesis 18:25; John 10:14-15

AT A GLANCE

Phil EuBank names the quiet religion beneath religious disaffiliation: the confidence that being a decent person, better than the next guy, is enough to satisfy God. Through the rich young ruler and Matthew 7's surprising verdict on the religious, he shows that 'good' is a standard no one can verify, and that Jesus offers not a higher bar to clear but a relationship dead people cannot earn their way into.

- Good-person faith fails because the moral standard is self-set, so the ruler keeps moving and no one can verify they measured up.
- Matthew 7 exposes religious people, not skeptics—Jesus rejects flawless resumes with 'I never knew you,' revealing performance without relationship.
- Christianity isn't bad people becoming good; it's dead people coming to life through relationship with Jesus, not moral achievement.

“Good is never good enough. Not when God is holy.”

EXPOSITION

Scripture engaged

[Ecclesiastes 7:2](#) — It is better to go to a funeral than to a party, because everyone must die, and the living need to remember this. (ERV)

[Mark 10:17-22](#) — Jesus started to leave, but a man ran to him and bowed down on his knees before him. The man asked, “Good Teacher, what must I do to get the life that never ends?” Jesus answered, “Why do you call me good? Only God is good. And you know his commands: ‘You must not murder anyone, you must not commit adultery, you must not steal, you must not lie, you must not cheat, you must respect your father and mother’” The man said, “Teacher, I have obeyed all these commands since I was a boy.” Jesus looked at the man in a way that showed how much he cared for him. He said, “There is still one thing you need to do. Go and sell everything you have. Give the money to those who are poor, and you will have riches in heaven. Then come and follow

me.” The man was upset when Jesus told him to give away his money. He didn’t want to do this, because he was very rich. So he went away sad. (ERV)

[Matthew 7:21-23](#) — “Not everyone who calls me Lord will enter God’s kingdom. The only people who will enter are those who do what my Father in heaven wants. On that last Day many will call me Lord. They will say, ‘Lord, Lord, by the power of your name we spoke for God. And by your name we forced out demons and did many miracles.’ Then I will tell those people clearly, ‘Get away from me, you people who do wrong. I never knew you.’” (ERV)

[Genesis 18:25](#) — Surely you would not destroy the city. You would not destroy fifty good people to kill those who are evil. If that happened, those who are good would be the same as those who are evil—both would be punished. As the judge of the whole world, surely you would do the right thing! (ERV)

[John 10:14-15](#) — “I am the shepherd who cares for the sheep. I know my sheep just as the Father knows me. And my sheep know me just as I know the Father. I give my life for these sheep.” (ERV)

The argument

The Moving Target of 'Good Enough' — Moral comparison can never verify its own verdict

Standing over 1,500 mourners at a young man's funeral, Phil EuBank noticed everyone doing the same silent math: if this happened to him, it could happen to me. That mental accounting, he argues, echoes Ecclesiastes 7—wisdom begins by facing mortality honestly. But most people in that room were running a second calculation too: was Justin good enough? EuBank names this cultural water we swim in—moralistic therapeutic deism and the New Atheists' confident 'be good without God'—and exposes its fatal flaw: 'At a funeral, everybody's taking grades, but nobody has the rubric.' When you set your own standard, you always compare yourself to someone worse, so the ruler never stops moving and the verdict never arrives.

Insight — A self-authored moral standard can never deliver the verdict it promises, because the one holding the ruler always sets it in his own favor.

Resume Versus Relationship — Why Jesus loved the rich young ruler before correcting him

Before Jesus says anything hard to the rich young ruler, Phil EuBank observes, 'Jesus, looking at him, loved him'—grace extended before truth is spoken. The man's resume is genuinely impressive; Jesus doesn't dispute it. But when Jesus tells him to sell what he has and follow, he isn't adding one more requirement to a checklist—he's exposing that the man's goodness had become a way of avoiding a deeper need. 'His resume was not the door of access to the kingdom of God,' EuBank says. 'Jesus was the door.' The man walks away sad, unable to release the very achievement he thought would save him.

Insight — Good works can function as a shield against the relationship they were never meant to replace.

The Surprising Audience of Judgment — Matthew 7 condemns the resume-full, not the irreligious

It's tempting to read Matthew 7's warning about those Jesus never knew as aimed at atheists or the religiously disaffiliated. EuBank insists otherwise: the people in the passage prophesied, cast out demons, and did mighty works in Jesus' name—'these are not irreligious people. These are the most religious people.' The verdict against them isn't a graded resume; Jesus doesn't say their goodness fell short. He says, 'I never knew you.' EuBank presses this close to home: 'A room can fill all the way up with people whose arms are full of good works, but their hearts are strangers to God.' The passage targets church people, not skeptics—including, he admits, seasons of his own life.

Insight — Doing impressive things in Jesus' name is no substitute for being known by him.

Known, Not Graded — The gospel's language is relational, not transactional

Jesus describes himself as the good shepherd who knows his own—relational language with no bar to clear. EuBank contrasts this with the exhausting math of moral achievement: 'You were not made so that you could be admired by God for your goodness. You were made to be known by God.' Goodness, in this frame, isn't manufactured to earn access; it flows out of a relationship already given by grace. 'The gospel is not that bad people can finally become good enough,' EuBank says. 'The gospel is that dead people can come all the way back to life because of Jesus.' The invitation isn't a higher resume—it's trust.

Insight — The goodness God wants is fruit of relationship with him, never currency to purchase it.

Cross-references

- [Ecclesiastes 7:2](#) — used to frame facing mortality honestly as the beginning of wisdom at a funeral
- [Genesis 18:25](#) — Abraham's plea to 'the judge of all the earth' shows the verdict on a life belongs to God, not us
- [John 10:14](#) — the good shepherd's relational 'knowing' contrasted with resume-based religion

DEVOTIONAL

There is a room full of people doing math they cannot finish. That is what a funeral does—it strips away the noise and leaves everyone alone with the ledger, holding a ruler no one gave them the right to hold. We have all stood in that room, even if the casket wasn't in front of us. We have all quietly measured ourselves against someone worse and called it peace. But the ruler keeps moving. It always does, because we are the ones who set it, and we are endlessly clever at setting it just low enough to clear. This is the exhausting secret of good-person

religion: it promises rest and delivers only more math, more performance, more arms full of good things and a heart growing stranger to the God those things were supposed to honor. The rich young ruler learned this. The prophets and workers of wonders in Matthew 7 learned it too late. Their resumes were flawless and their answer was still, I never knew you. Not because their goodness was too small, but because goodness was never the door. The good shepherd does not ask for your credentials. He says, I know my own. That is the whole gospel compressed into five words—not admiration for what you've built, but knowledge of who you are, gaps included. You do not have to keep doing math. You only have to be known. Set the ruler down. Someone already died so you wouldn't need it.

Reflection

- Where in your life have you quietly become the judge of your own goodness, setting the ruler exactly where you can clear it?
- What would it cost you to trade a lifetime of resume-building for the relationship Jesus actually offers?
- Is there a place where your good works have become a wall between you and the God who wants to know you?

Closing prayer

God, some of us are setting down our goodness as the means of knowing you, or of hedging our bets about who you are. That feels like a deep sacrifice. Show us your sacrifice—the work you already did on our behalf. Give us clarity to believe you are who you say you are, to confess we cannot get there on our own, and to trust our lives to you. Let this be an eternal life that starts now, not just longer but different—not easier, but truly good. In Jesus' name, amen.

FORMATION

One thing to remember

Your goodness will never be good enough—Jesus doesn't want a thicker resume, he wants a relationship he already died to provide.

This week

This week, before you list what you've done for God, sit quietly with John 10:14 and ask him to know you as you are—then simply tell him the truth, gaps and all, in prayer.

Return to [John 10:14](#)