

Unlearning God: A Study Guide

I. Overview of Core Concepts

This text, "Unlearning God," challenges conventional perceptions of God, advocating for a shift from a rule-based, judgmental understanding to one rooted in unconditional love, grace, and relationship. The author, Mike, emphasizes the importance of "unlearning" inherited or culturally reinforced beliefs about God that are often negative and restrictive. He contrasts these with a personal, passionate, and forgiving God who desires intimacy and offers freedom. The text also explores how our perception of God influences our lives and interactions, highlighting the pervasive influence of media and personal upbringing, and asserting the supremacy of God's true voice.

II. Chapter-by-Chapter Breakdown

Chapter 1: What's on Your Sleeve?

- **Key Idea:** We all outwardly express what's most important to us, whether consciously or not. Many people carry a distorted image of God based on rules and punishment.
- **Concepts:** "Wearing God on your sleeve," unlearning traditional views of God, God as a vending machine vs. a God of infinite grace, love, and freedom.
- **Author's Stance:** Rejects the "disappointed God" who always thinks we can do "a little bit better." Embraces a God with passion, excitement, and a desire for relationship, who has already dealt with sin through Jesus.

Chapter 2: Free the David

- **Key Idea:** Much like Michelangelo freed David from a block of marble, we need to chip away inherited and restrictive beliefs to reveal our true selves and God's true nature.
- **Concepts:** Inherited beliefs (e.g., political affiliation, religion), "The Great Punisher," Socrates' "unexamined life," Michelangelo's sculpting philosophy, breaking free from rigid thinking.
- **Author's Stance:** Encourages self-reflection to understand personal belief systems, emphasizing that God has already judged Christ for all sins, freeing believers to receive grace and live authentically.

Chapter 3: Meet My Source

- **Key Idea:** Our view of God profoundly shapes who we are, and true understanding comes from recognizing God's nature as love and mercy, not judgment. Scientific observation also points to a divine creator.
- **Concepts:** Perspective on God (statue analogy), God as savior vs. judge (drowning analogy), evidence of God in science (astronomy, physics, mathematics, the universe's vastness), God's gift of grace.
- **Author's Stance:** God is the "life vest," not swimming lessons. Science affirms God's existence as the intelligent designer of the universe, reinforcing His personal care and unconditional love for humanity.

Chapter 4: The Three Voices

- **Key Idea:** We are constantly influenced by three voices: media, our upbringing/internalized beliefs, and God's voice. The true voice of God offers freedom from condemnation and judgment.
- **Concepts:** Media's pervasive influence, internalized parental/societal voices, God's voice as compassionate, merciful, and forgiving, rather than judgmental.
- **Author's Stance:** Critiques the lies and harm often brought by the first two voices. Highlights God's voice as the only one that leads to genuine happiness and fulfillment. Suggests reading Scripture (Psalms, Proverbs, John) as a way to hear God's voice.

Chapter 5: Mike's Ten Commandments

- **Key Idea:** God desires a relationship based on unconditional love, not a conditional one based on strict adherence to rules. Conditional love stifles true intimacy and creates fear.
- **Concepts:** The author's hypothetical "Ten Commandments" analogy to illustrate conditional love and its negative impact, the "toast" analogy for the obsessive fear created by a single condition, God's unconditional love, forgiveness of sins (past, present, future) through Christ.
- **Author's Stance:** Advocates for "unlearning" the view of God as a "rule master" or "grade book" keeper. Emphasizes that God's love is a gift of freedom and empowerment through the Holy Spirit, received humbly without conditions.

Chapter 6: God Gives a Damn

- **Key Idea:** Our perception of God directly impacts how we live. God is a loving, intimate Father who deeply cares for humanity and desires a close relationship.
- **Concepts:** God as a stern father vs. a loving father, "in-to-me-see" (intimacy), God's commitment and knowledge of us, the innate human desire to be like God, God as the ultimate role model.
- **Author's Stance:** Challenges the assumption that God is punitive or uninterested. Reassures readers that God is actively involved, compassionate, and desires intimate conversation. God's love molds us into His image. His voice is always uplifting.

III. Key Themes and Recurring Ideas

- **Unlearning:** The central theme, advocating for dismantling preconceived and often negative notions of God.
- **God's Nature:** A shift from a judgmental, rule-based, disappointed God to one of infinite grace, unconditional love, freedom, passion, and mercy.
- **Relationship over Rules:** Emphasizing God's desire for intimacy and connection, rather than mere adherence to regulations.
- **Freedom:** The idea of being liberated from fear, judgment, and self-imposed restrictions to live authentically.
- **Grace and Forgiveness:** The cornerstone of God's offer, rooted in Christ's sacrifice, making sin a non-issue in the relationship.
- **The Voice of God:** Discerning God's true voice from other pervasive influences (media, upbringing) as the only source of truth, compassion, and guidance.
- **Impact of Perception:** How one's view of God fundamentally shapes one's life, happiness, and interactions.
- **Science and Faith:** The assertion that scientific exploration, particularly of the universe's vastness and intricacy, should lead to a greater appreciation and belief in a divine Creator.

IV. Quiz

Instructions: Answer each question in 2-3 sentences.

1. According to the author, what is the problem with viewing God as a "vending machine," and what alternative perspective is offered?

2. Explain the author's interpretation of Michelangelo's method of sculpting and how it relates to the concept of "Freeing the David" in a person's life.
3. How does the author use the analogy of a drowning person and a life vest to describe Jesus's role, and what does this analogy emphasize about God's nature?
4. Identify and briefly describe the "three voices" discussed in the text, and state which one the author believes is truly important.
5. What is the main point the author makes by recounting the hypothetical "Mike's Ten Commandments" scenario at his house?
6. Explain how the "toast" analogy illustrates the author's point about conditional love in relationships.
7. How does the author connect the vastness and complexity of the universe to the nature of God?
8. According to the text, what is the typical response people give when asked to describe God's face looking at them, and what does the author say about this view?
9. What is the "greatest need of the human heart" according to the author, and how does God address it?
10. What advice does the author give for hearing God's voice, particularly for those who associate churches with rules?

V. Quiz Answer Key

1. Viewing God as a "vending machine" implies that blessings are conditional upon good behavior, leading to a transactional relationship. The author offers the perspective of a God of infinite grace, love, and freedom, who blesses independently of human performance because sin has already been dealt with by Jesus.
2. Michelangelo saw the statue "trapped inside" the marble and chipped away the excess to free it. This relates to "Freeing the David" by suggesting that individuals must chip away inherited beliefs and rigid thinking to reveal their true selves, the person God already sees, rather than trying to conform to external expectations.
3. The drowning person needs a life vest (Jesus, who came to save) rather than swimming lessons (judgment or rules). This analogy emphasizes that God's primary nature is salvific and merciful, offering immediate grace and salvation rather than criticism or instruction on how to earn help.
4. The three voices are the media (pervasive, constantly screaming information), the internalized voice of upbringing (parents, teachers,

societal beliefs), and the voice of God. The author believes God's voice is the only one that truly matters, as it offers compassion, mercy, and freedom from condemnation.

5. The "Mike's Ten Commandments" scenario illustrates that a relationship governed by many rules creates anxiety and prevents genuine enjoyment or intimacy. The main point is that God desires a relationship with us based on unconditional love and connection, not fear-driven adherence to arbitrary regulations.
6. The "toast" analogy shows that if one small, seemingly arbitrary condition is placed on love, it becomes the sole focus, leading to obsessive fear and ultimately destroying the potential for intimacy. It highlights how conditional love, even with just one condition, undermines a true relationship.
7. The author connects the universe's vastness (sun's diameter, astronomical units, Milky Way's composition) to God by arguing that such intricate and immense creation demands a powerful, intelligent Creator. This immense scale makes it illogical to think God is preoccupied with minor human failures, instead reinforcing His capacity for unconditional love and grace.
8. Most people describe God's face as "sad" or "a tad disappointed," often imagining Him saying, "You can do just a little bit better." The author rejects this, stating that the God of the universe has passion and excitement, eager to be in relationship and pour out His Holy Spirit.
9. The "greatest need of the human heart" is the forgiveness of sin. God addresses this by taking away all sins—past, present, and future—through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, offering it as a free gift of grace that only needs to be humbly accepted.
10. For those who associate churches with rules, the author suggests reading Scripture (specifically Psalms, Proverbs, or John) for ten minutes a day. He clarifies that Scripture is not a "behavior modification manual" but rather reveals our true nature as God's children and how to receive and share His love.

VI. Essay Format Questions (No Answers Supplied)

1. The author repeatedly contrasts two different views of God: one based on rules and judgment, and another based on love, grace, and relationship. Discuss the implications of each view on an individual's spiritual life, behavior, and sense of freedom, drawing specific examples and analogies from the text.

2. Analyze the concept of "unlearning" as presented in the text. What specific elements or beliefs does the author urge readers to unlearn, and why is this process deemed "imperative"? How does "unlearning" facilitate a deeper relationship with God and oneself?
3. The text identifies "three voices" that influence individuals. Evaluate the impact of the first two voices (media and upbringing) on a person's perception of themselves and God. How does the author propose one can shift their focus to "the third voice," and what are the benefits of doing so?
4. Discuss the role of "conditional love" as a destructive force in human relationships, as illustrated by the "Mike's Ten Commandments" and "toast" analogies. How does the author argue that God's love is fundamentally different, and what freedom does this understanding offer?
5. The author uses scientific observations (astronomy, quantum physics, the vastness of the universe) to support his view of God. Explain how these scientific points are leveraged to reframe the reader's understanding of God's character and His relationship with humanity. Do you find this integration of science and faith compelling?

VII. Glossary of Key Terms

- **Unlearning God:** The central process advocated in the text, referring to the act of consciously dismantling and replacing ingrained, often negative or restrictive, perceptions of God that were inherited or culturally acquired.
- **Wearing God on Your Sleeve:** An idiom used to describe outwardly expressing what is most important or dominant in one's life, whether consciously (like talking about God constantly) or unconsciously (like boasting about wealth or achievements).
- **God of Rules and Regulations:** A traditional, often fear-based, perception of God as a strict disciplinarian who punishes wrongdoing and rewards good behavior, similar to a "vending machine."
- **God of Infinite Grace, Love, and Freedom:** The author's preferred understanding of God, characterized by unconditional acceptance, forgiveness, and a desire for relationship, rather than adherence to conditions.
- **The Great Punisher:** A common, fear-inducing view of God, particularly from a rigid religious upbringing, where God is seen as an arbiter constantly judging every mistake.

- **Free the David:** An analogy inspired by Michelangelo's sculpting process, representing the act of chipping away external pressures, inherited beliefs, and rigid thinking to reveal one's true, authentic self, as God sees them.
- **Life Vest Analogy:** Used to describe Jesus's role, emphasizing that He came to save (like a life vest to a drowning person) rather than to judge or provide "swimming lessons" (rules or conditions).
- **The Three Voices:** The three main influences shaping an individual's beliefs and perceptions: the pervasive voice of media, the internalized voice of one's upbringing (parents, teachers, societal norms), and the true voice of God.
- **God's True Voice:** Characterized by compassion, mercy, grace, understanding, and forgiveness, standing in stark contrast to the often condemning or demanding messages from the other two voices.
- **Conditional Love:** A type of love that is dependent on the recipient meeting certain criteria or conditions, which the author argues stifles intimacy and creates fear. Illustrated by the "Mike's Ten Commandments" and "toast" analogies.
- **Unconditional Love:** God's love, as described by the author, which is freely given without any prerequisites or conditions, offering complete forgiveness of sins (past, present, and future) through Christ.
- **Intimacy (In-to-me-see):** The deep, personal connection God desires with humanity, implying a desire for individuals to open up and allow God to see and reveal their true selves.
- **Gift of Grace:** God's unmerited favor and love, freely offered to all humanity, which is received humbly without any works or conditions.