

unlearning god 1 What's on Your Sleeve? A few weeks ago, a friend of mine said to me, "You kinda wear God on your sleeve, Mike." I thought that was pretty funny, so I said, "As opposed to what? What do you wear on your sleeve?" He looked confused. "I'm not sure what you mean." "I imagine you say that I wear God on my sleeve because I talk about Him all the time. So what do you talk about all the time? Whatever that is, that's what you wear on your sleeve." My friend had no idea what he wore on his sleeve. Most of us don't. But believe me: we're all wearing something there. Maybe you're always talking about how much money you make and your yachts and summer homes, or your fancy degrees and publication history, or how great and smart your kids are, or what a fantastic collection of clothes/art/stamps / 3 / 4 c LOVE GOD, HATE CHURCH you have. Or maybe you take pride in your poverty. I think it's time we all became acutely aware of what we're wearing on our sleeves so that we can actually have a discussion about it. When I said that to my friend, the conversation got real. I slowly began to realize that my God and the God he was seeing were two different Gods. The God he grew up with was not the same God I was talking about. And that made me sad—that my friend didn't know the God of my understanding, a God of infinite grace, love, and freedom. "I've got news for you, my friend," I said. "Could be good news, could be bad news, depending on how you look at it. But here it is: You're going to have to unlearn God." Most of us grew up with a God of rules and regulations, dos and don'ts. God was used as a stick—a punishing rod. "Do right, and God will bless you. Do wrong, and God will smite you down." So, basically, make good choices, and you get a reward; make bad choices, and you get punished. That is not the God of the universe. God doesn't ever want us to confuse our behavior with His blessings. He's basically telling us, "Don't think of me as a vending machine—that you can press the button and there's your reward. You can make all kinds of mistakes, and I may still bless you. You can do something awesome, and not be blessed in the way you expected. I'm your God. I love you. I've taken away all your sin—that is why Jesus died for you. That's my gift. Now go enjoy life and love other people." UNLEARNING GOD c5 That's not the God many of us are familiar with. If that describes you, then you've got to unlearn the God you grew up with. It's imperative that you do. In the groups I work with, I often ask people to describe the face of God. I say, "He's looking at you right now. What does His face look like?" The responses I get are interesting. "Well, His eyes are really sad. Like He's a tad disappointed." That's the one I get most of the time—God is looking at them with vague disappointment. "Okay, so He's a tad disappointed," I say. "Now if He were to say something to you right now, with that disappointed look, what words would come out of His mouth?" Nine times out of ten, these people tell me God would say to them, "You can do just a little bit better." That's most people's view of God: that He's a tad disappointed and thinks we can do just a little bit better. That's the God they grew up with. Meanwhile I'm sitting here going, "Are you kidding me? That is not the God that runs the universe!" When I envision the face of God, He's got

passion and fire in His eyes—and excitement! He sent Jesus to take away all our sins, and He's dying to be in relationship with us. He wants to pour His Holy Spirit on us to give us wisdom beyond our years. He wants to fill our heads and hearts with thoughts and feelings we would never have without Him, 6 c LOVE GOD, HATE CHURCH about how He sees us, not how other people see us or how we see ourselves. That's the God I'm talking about. I don't follow a God who's only focused on rules and regulations for me to follow—who'll punish me or send me to hell if I don't do the right thing. My God isn't a giant cosmic killjoy. That's not why I get out of bed in the mornings. I get out of bed every day fired up with passion because my God is a life-giving God of passion. That's what He wants for me. If I wear God on my sleeve, that's why. Because I'm excited about worshipping a God who fills me with His love, so I can go out and share it with everyone I meet. And so I can help people unlearn their God—and meet mine. What one thing do you need to unlearn about God? 2 Free the David On the South Side of Chicago, where I grew up, our whole neighborhood was Democratic. I was a Democrat, too. Do you know why? Because my mom and dad were Democrats. If you grew up on the South Side, you were a Democrat. That's just the way things were. I grew up thinking Republicans were the enemy, simply because that's the way I was raised. But I didn't know why I believed that. I was just parroting what my parents said about politics. It was the same with my belief system. I was a Catholic because I was raised that way. It's one thing for a kid to inherit someone else's beliefs, but for me, it didn't stop with childhood. Even as an adult, I was bound to this strict Roman Catholic way of thinking. For years, I thought of God as "The Great Punisher," an arbiter who would judge / 7 / 8 c LOVE GOD, HATE CHURCH me every single time I screwed up. Why was I so quick to adopt everybody else's opinions, instead of taking the time to figure out what I believed? As Socrates said, "The unexamined life is not worth living." And I agree: it's not. Have you ever thought about how a sculptor creates a sculpture? Most of these guys have an idea in their head, and then they go get a block of marble. "Whatever I'm seeing in my head," they say, "I'm going to put it in this block of marble." But Michelangelo said, "Not me." He would sit in a chair and look at a block of marble for weeks—sometimes even months—at a time, until he saw what was trapped inside the marble. "Every block of stone has a statue inside it," said Michelangelo, "and it is the task of the sculptor to discover it." He chipped around and discovered the statue inside—and then he freed David from the block of stone. The goal is to be freer at the end of this book than when we first started. That's the journey we're embarking on together: to bust free from that rigid block of stone. I want to free you with the thoughts and ideas I'm going to be sharing with you in these pages. I want you to be free to unlock the treasure you have inside of you, so that people can meet the real you—not the imprisoned one who says, "Let's make sure we follow all the restrictions, rules and regulations, and commandments." Or, "Let's make sure we have all the right UNLEARNING GOD c9 behaviors and look good doing it." I want your heart to desire a real relationship

with God. The idea of “freeing the David” inside of me was crucial in my own life. What did I need to chip away to free the real person who was inside me, the person God saw? My whole life, I’d felt like He was judging me for all the things I was doing or not doing, but what I didn’t realize was that He had already judged Christ for every sin I ever committed. “I punished Christ for everything,” God said. “And if I punished Him for everything, there’s nothing left for you.” Only then did I begin to understand that my job was to receive that gift, get on with my life, and bring God’s true love, mercy, and forgiveness to the world. Are you ready free your David?

3 Meet My Source Our view of God shapes who we are. The God I grew up with is not the God of my understanding now. Actually, it’s more accurate to say that God hasn’t changed, but my view of Him has changed. If you and I are both at a museum, and we’re looking at the same statue from different sides, we’re not seeing it from the same perspective. I’m going, “Do you see what I’m seeing?” And you say, “No, I see something totally different.” But the statue itself hasn’t changed. God allowed me to see Him the way He really is—a God of love and mercy, not a God who’s here to judge us. When Jesus came to Earth, He didn’t come to judge the world. He came to save us. If you’re in a lake, drowning because you can’t swim and bobbing up and down, and here comes a boat next to you and there’s a guy inside, let me tell you what you don’t / 10 / UNLEARNING GOD c11 need from that guy: swimming lessons! Can you imagine if, instead of throwing you a life vest, he said, “Now, here’s what your problem is: you’re splashing around too much and not keeping your head above water. I’m going to give you a quick swimming lesson. First, take your right arm ...” You don’t care. You’re screaming, “Get me out of the water! I’m dying!” If he throws you a life vest, you’re not going to care one bit about your “form” or your capacity as a swimmer. You’re going to hold onto it with everything in you, because if that life vest doesn’t hold you up, you die. Jesus is the exact opposite of the guy in that boat. He didn’t come to judge us; He is the life vest. He said it him self, “I came to save you.” After He saves us we are looking at Him and just being so grateful. Out of that gratefulness I start to wonder and ask why did you do this? And then I begin to discover that it is because of His great love for me. That’s when my life begins to change. Suddenly, I see evidence of God in everything around me—in the particles of the air, the sunshine, the chemical properties of photosynthesis... If you want to understand God, look at science. Look at astronomy. Look at quantum physics. Look at math. You study these fields and you go, “There’s got to be a God behind this.” Let’s say you have a very nice Rolex watch. It looks beau tiful and it keeps time better than any watch you’ve ever owned. Well, who’s behind it? A watchmaker. You can’t get 12 c LOVE GOD, HATE CHURCH something as intricate as a watch without having a maker behind it. Just look at the universe! The sun has been in its place since the beginning of time, and it hasn’t moved. Look at the stars—at Orion and all the other constellations and all the galaxies. It’s absolutely amazing. So to say, “Well, I’m not sure there’s a God....” Are you kidding? Let’s go a little deeper. The diameter of the sun is approx

imately 865,000 miles. That's pretty large. In comparison, the diameter of the earth is 7,918 miles. Wow. That's a big difference, right? The sun is over a hundred times larger than the earth. Scientists call the distance between the earth and the sun an astronomical unit. One astronomical unit is 93 million miles. That's such a long way, scientists have to bring that number down so we can have a better mental understanding of the vastness of the universe. The nearest star (besides the sun) is 300,000 astronomical units from planet Earth. That is a distance of 93 million miles times 300,000. That's just incredible. Who are we dealing with here? The God of the universe who made this vast universe and put us on a tiny little planet called Earth! If God is managing a universe like the one we live in, do you really think He is looking at us going, "Eh, you know what? You're not pleasing to me. I don't like what you're doing."? No! He's offering us a gift of grace to bring us back in relationship with Him—and He's offering that UNLEARNING GOD c13 gift of grace to everybody. How could we refuse that from the God who made everything? When you realize how small we are in comparison, God's offer becomes even more outstanding. Ninety-nine percent of the matter in the Milky Way is contained in the sun. The rest is 1 percent. As human beings, we are part of that 1 percent. And there are seven billion people on planet Earth, which means that each of us is .000000. My calculator won't even compute that. Just consider the vastness of the universe. Who is this God, and is He personal? Will He talk to us? Does He love us? Does He care about what we do and what we believe? If God is managing a universe like the one we live in, do you really think He is looking at us going, "You know what? You're not pleasing to me. I don't like what you're doing."? No! He's offering us a gift of grace to bring us back in relationship with Him—and He's offering that gift of grace to everybody. How could we refuse that from the God who made everything? When you realize how small we are in comparison, God's offer becomes even more outstanding. What if God is saying, "You matter. You, individually, matter to me. I want to have a relationship with you because of what my Son did. That's the gift of grace." That's pretty amazing. All of science should bring us closer to our maker, a God of love and mercy and a God 14 c LOVE GOD, HATE CHURCH of science. And yet for some reason we want to sit around with our fancy PhDs and intellects and discuss whether God exists! Come on. It's time we get real with ourselves, let alone with each other. Simply put, science is the study of the One who made it all—God! There is a God of the universe. Believe this. Accept it. Let it change your thinking. Let that become the thought that changes your belief system and that will eventually change the way you look at other people and yourself. Consider Jesus: He stepped out of time and space and became one of us, lived and died and rose again for us. And showed us that the God of the universe loves us with an unconditional love. No conditions. Come as you are. He said come AS YOU ARE. Yes, we matter. What is keeping you from believing this and just coming as you are? 4 The Three Voices There are three voices in the universe today. The first voice is the media: television, the Internet, social

media, newspapers (if anyone still reads newspapers these days). Pick your poison. Whatever it is, we've got a steady IV drip of media voices screaming at us 24/7. Media is how people exchange and receive information. You turn on the TV, and it thinks for you. You lose three friends on Facebook and wonder, "What am I doing wrong?" The media is the most pervasive of the three voices, because it's the one that speaks to us, relentlessly, every single day. The second voice is the voice inside each of us, formed by how we were raised and what we believed. It's really a mash-up of hundreds of tiny voices—the parents, families, elders or teachers who started instilling their beliefs in us at a very early age. Whether they were Catholic nuns, Jewish / 15 / 16 c LOVE GOD, HATE CHURCH rabbis, or Baptist preachers, the adults who instructed our young selves had a lasting impact on our future beliefs. We absorbed everything they did and said, forming that second voice—that voice in your head that says, "What would my mom think if I did this? What would my dad say? Will my friends judge me? How will people view me if I do this?" Then there's the third voice. The third voice is the voice of God, and it's really the only one that matters. Unfortunately, most people assume God's voice is judgmental and condemning. They picture Him as a heartless ruler with an iron fist, sitting up there on His throne, throwing down rules. People view God as a punisher, the sort of guy only interested in handing out guilty verdicts to His children. If you break a rule, you get struck by lightning. You got in that car wreck because you didn't obey Him. You didn't get that promotion because you broke Rule #3512b. No wonder most people choose to listen to the first and second voices instead of the third! Even if the messages from those voices aren't always positive—we may feel judgment from our families, or we constantly get the message from the media that we'll never measure up—they somehow seem more relevant to our lives. And it's still better than listening to some vindictive God who's just setting us up to fail. The irony is that God's voice is exactly the opposite of what most people think. It's the only voice in which there is the offer of no condemnation and no judgment—just compassion, mercy, grace, understanding, and forgiveness. That's UNLEARNING GOD c17 the voice we need to wake up to every morning if we want to live happy, fulfilling lives. But people are missing out on the one voice that truly matters. God's voice is the only voice that can get us through life, the only one of the three that can lead us to a place where we're genuinely happy, humble, and enjoyable to be around. God's voice guides and helps us, whereas the other two voices mostly bring us lies and harm, depending on whether they agree with what God has already said. Most of us ignore the third voice because we don't understand it. If I'm sitting at a Starbucks, and I really want to get to know a guy who comes in but he starts speaking Russian to me, I won't be able to understand him. He can talk all he wants, saying anything at all, but I still won't understand the language. He could even be telling me, "I'm about to kill you. I have a knife in my backpack, and I'm going to cut off your head," and I'd have no idea! I'd be laughing and smiling along with him, because I don't know what he's saying. He

could also be telling me I'm the most incredible guy in the world and that he wants to put ten million dollars in my bank account immediately. The point is this: I don't know what the guy's saying, so I'm probably not going to sit there and try to have a discussion with him. We wouldn't get very far. It's no different with God. If we don't understand what He's saying, of course we don't want to listen to His voice! Everybody thinks God is all about what we do and don't do. 18 c LOVE GOD, HATE CHURCH They think He's all about behavior. But that's not who God is—that's only what people believe about Him. The true voice of God is powerful—not because He's some taskmaster, but because He is a loving, forgiving, compassionate God. Compare that to the voice of the media, which says, "Buy this product if you want to feel worthy," or "If you want to be beautiful, you need to invest in this cream and that surgery." Compare it to the voice of some long-lost teacher or overbearing parent that tells you, "You'll never be good enough, no matter how hard you try." What voice do you listen to? Which of these voices is predominant inside your head? If you're listening to the first or second voice, you're missing out on all the good stuff life has to offer. Once you hear the true voice of God in your head, you'll never want to hear another voice again. And the more you get used to hearing His voice, the more your voice to others is the same as His. That's what people really want to hear: when our words to each other become what God already has declared. Get ready to be fully human! What has to happen for you to hear His voice? Most people think that going to church is the way we learn about God. And at times that's certainly true, if you're not being constantly told what to do and not do, but instead are being told how amazing God's love is for you. How passionate about you He really is! How ready He is to forgive and extend mercy and help! UNLEARNING GOD c19 We can also read His Word to us—the Scriptures. The book of promises to His kids. It's not a behavior modification manual; rather, it identifies our true nature as His children, and how His children receive and pour out His love to others. Read it for ten minutes a day for one month. Believe it and trust it. Start in the Psalms, or Proverbs, or John. But just get started. Will you try it? 5 Mike's Ten Commandments Let's say you and your wife get an invitation in the mail. It's the fancy kind, with thick gold-leaf paper and a fancy red ribbon. You open the invitation and it says, "You are cordially invited to Mike Moore's house. Please come over whenever you'd like. Just let yourself in the front door." "Well," you say to your wife, "Mike's a nice enough guy." "And he has a pool," she adds. You both agree: sure, why not? You'll come right over. But when you get to my house, you see a long piece of paper nailed to the front door. It's so long it's really more like a scroll. "Mike's Ten Commandments," it says at the top, in bold black print. / 20 / UNLEARNING GOD c21 MIKE'S TEN COMMANDMENTS COMMANDMENt 1: You must leave your shoes at the front door before entering my house. COMMANDMENt 2: You cannot, under any circumstances, use profanity in my house. COMMANDMENt 3: There are three rooms you are not allowed in. COMMANDMENt 4: You cannot go swimming unless you have a swimsuit on. COMMANDMENt 5: You cannot touch

the grill. That is my domain. COMMANDMENt 6: You cannot walk into the wine cellar. COMMANDMENt 7: You cannot use my washer and dryer. Only the housekeeper is allowed in the laundry room. COMMANDMENt 8: Don't even think about touching the photographs on the mantle. To do so means you're lusting after the people in them. COMMANDMENt 9: Do not eat the food in the fridge—any of it. COMMANDMENt 10: Thou shalt not use more toilet paper than is absolutely necessary, at any time. 22 c LOVE GOD, HATE CHURCH You think this is all a little strange, but you did both bring your swimsuits, and you're still hoping to take a dip in the pool. So, you enter the house warily. With each step, you feel increasingly anxious and uncomfortable. Your wife starts to wander down the hall. "Wait, baby," you call out. "Hold on a second." "What?" she says. "Mike said we couldn't go near the wine cellar." "He didn't say we couldn't go near it. He said we couldn't go in it." "Yeah, but if we go near it, he'll think we're going to go in it. So maybe we shouldn't get within, like, ten feet of it." Your whole conversation at my house has become about this: are you going to break the rules? You are not enjoying yourselves; you are worried and scared that you will mess up and be kicked out. Imagine how different it would be if I had stood at the door to greet you, saying, "Come on in, guys! How are you tonight? Good to see you! Let's go have some fun." When I actually do have people over, I obviously don't have a list of rules posted on the front door. The whole reason I've invited you over is so you can enjoy yourself, and so I can get to know you better. Why? Because I want to relate to you. I don't need you to follow a bunch of rules in my house—that's not how we build a relationship. Now, obviously, if you try to kill somebody under my roof, I am going to tell you that it's not appropriate. Certainly, UNLEARNING GOD c23 there are some parameters I need you to abide by. My point is that the way God relates to us is no different than the way we relate to each other. He wants a relationship with you. He doesn't want you to tiptoe around following a bunch of arbitrary rules. This is why I challenge people's views about God, because I want to help them unlearn all of the BS that has made them view God as a rule master. The God of my understanding isn't following you around with a grade book, marking a big red X every time you screw up and touch the grill. If God's love for you is conditional—based on what you do or don't do—then the only thing you will focus on is the condition. You will not be able to have a relationship with Him. It's impossible. That's how it is with conditional love—it kills the potential for a real relationship because it becomes all about the rules. Imagine a woman who says to her fiancé, "I'll love you no matter what, till death do us part. I'm in this relationship 100 percent, and I won't change my mind. But honey, there is one thing. If you burn the toast, I'm out. Other than that, I'll never leave you. You can embezzle money, or have an affair, or do anything else, and I'll still be right here by your side. But don't you ever burn the toast." What is the one and only thing that woman's poor fiancé is going to think about? The toast! "Oh my God, I can't burn the toast," he says. "As a matter of fact, I can't even have a toaster in the house. It's too 24 c LOVE GOD, HATE

CHURCH risky. You know what? I won't even have bread in the house, because if the bread gets too close to a flame on the stove, it'll look like toast. So I have to make sure there's no bread." So they get married, and he makes sure to have no bread products of any kind around the kitchen. But then one day his sister stops by with pastries, and he freaks out. "I can't have flour products in this house! What if the heat gets too high and they start to burn? Like toast?" He runs through the house in a panic, making sure the thermostat is under seventy degrees, and then he banishes his sister and makes her throw out all the pastries in the dumpster. He's completely lost his mind, all because of that one little condition. The poor guy can't get past the toast. Soon it's all he thinks about. Eventually, the marriage fails because he is absolutely terrified of burning some toast-like object and his wife leaving him because of the ultimatum she gave him. Of course, in the end, she leaves him anyway. Where is the intimacy in that relationship? It went the way of the toaster: gone. God's love is unconditional. He isn't holding a list of commandments over you with an ultimatum: follow all of these, and I'll love you, but break one, and I'll stop. "You're free to make a choice to do what you want," He says. "I will take away all your sins—past, present, and future—at the cross." And He says, "I will give you the gift of the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit will empower your life." We only have to humbly UNLEARNING GOD c25 and freely accept what He's offered us. That's it. There are no other conditions between God and us. That's the only way the human heart can be free—when there are no conditions in play. You can use my grill, go into my wine cellar, touch my photographs, and use as much toilet paper as you want, and I will not abandon you. In truth, I'll only love you all the more. You have to know that, no matter what you do, I will not abandon our friendship. Remember the greatest need of the human heart is the forgiveness of sin. What is keeping you, right now, from fully receiving his love and forgiveness? 6 God Gives a Damn The way we view God determines how we will live on planet Earth. Christian, atheist, Buddhist—doesn't matter. If you see God as a stern and strict father type, then you're not going to have very much fun believing in God. One of my closest friends lost his dad six years ago. My friend was fifty-eight years old when his father got sick, and the two had never been particularly close. His dad had been pretty unemotional the whole time my friend was growing up—never the type to show affection or tell his son how much he loved him. As a result, my friend grew up with deep scars and spent most of his life self-protecting. In the last months of his life, all his dad wanted to do was to sit in a chair and talk to his son. And finally, my friend agreed. So there the two of them were, in a hospital room together, at the bitter end. The old man tried to say / 26 / UNLEARNING GOD c27 all the things he wanted to say to his son, but my friend wouldn't let him. "It's taken fifty-eight years for you to finally want to talk to me?" he said angrily. "When I was a kid, you wouldn't sit down and talk to me because it was all about you. And now you're telling me I have to sit down and hear whatever it is you have to say?" Furious, my friend got up and walked out of

the hospital. His father died that afternoon. That just about broke my heart. And then I realized we do the same thing with God. We walk around going, “Yeah, God’s out there somewhere, but He doesn’t want to talk to me. He’s not interested in me.” And we miss out on these opportunities to let God speak to us—to hear what He has to say. Why do we always assume God is this punitive judge, ready to slam down His gavel? We get in a car wreck or have a fight with our wife, and we assume God is punishing us. Really? Is that the way God is? What do you do when one of your kids disobeys you? Do you break both of their arms and put them in the hospital to teach the lesson? I hope not! That’s not what loving fathers do—and God is the ultimate loving father. We tend to forget that. All God wants is intimacy. In-to-me-see. He wants to look inside you and show you who you really are. He wants you to carry out His message to planet Earth: that He not 28 c LOVE GOD, HATE CHURCH only gives a damn about what He’s created, but does it in a merciful, tender, compassionate way. Every day, God is basically saying, “Son, sit on my lap. What’s going on?” To which you reply, “Well, Dad, you know what’s going on. You’re God.” To which He replies, “Of course I do, but I want you to tell me. I want to relate to you. I want to talk to you. Me and you. Let’s just talk.” Here’s the thing: God doesn’t just love you, He knows you—intimately, inside and out. Even better, He’s fully committed to you. Through God’s love, you get to see what you’re really like, and He likes you. He already knows what you’re really like, because He made you in His image. Which is why that love will start to mold you into a compassionate, tender person, because that’s who He is. You know how we spend our whole lives trying not to turn into our parents, but we can’t always help it? It’s like that with God, too. Inside every human being ever to be born and live on planet Earth, there lives a desire to be exactly like the God of the universe. God put that desire in them. Now, we can choose to say no. We can run from it. We can say, “Nah, I don’t believe that.” But why would we? God is the greatest role model you could ever have. Maybe you didn’t have good role models in your life. Maybe your parents set conditions on their love for you, and you felt that, no matter what you did, you could never UNLEARNING GOD c29 measure up. Maybe your mom, dad, or some other adult in your life never cared about you one bit. I’m here to tell you this: your Father in heaven is nothing like that. He gives more than a damn. He gave His one and only Son so that you could fulfill your purpose on this earth and have eternal life in heaven. Sit down in that chair right now and let him tell you so! What do you feel Him saying to you right now? If it’s not uplifting, it’s not His voice!