

Why I'm a Christian | Week 4: Doubting Our Doubts | 2/16/20

Good Morning. If you're a guest, I'm Michael. I'm one of the pastors here. Glad to be with you. Just gonna jump right in this morning... **Turn to Mark 9...**

This is one of my favorite events in Jesus' ministry. In Mark 9, we pick up with a story of a father whose child has been stricken with an unclean spirit that is causing all kinds of mental and physical harm to him. And the father knows that if anyone can help, Jesus and his people are the ones who could do it. So he brings his child to Jesus' disciples to be freed from this spirit and healed. But it doesn't go as he - or the disciples, for that matter - expected it to go. For some reason, the disciples can't cast it out and this begins to cause a bit of a scene... and then Jesus pulls up...

Mark 9:21-25 [21] And Jesus asked his father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood. [22] And it has often cast him into fire and into water, to destroy him. But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us."

Imagine for a moment being that father. What would you have been thinking? I know I, at least, would be thinking something along the lines of: "I thought this was supposed to go differently? I thought y'all were supposed to be able to do this? I trusted you and this didn't go according to plan. Maybe I'm wrong about this. Maybe I'm wrong about you - who you are and what you claim to be." I'd be full of doubt. And apparently this guy is, too.

[23] And Jesus said to him, "If you can! All things are possible for one who believes." [24] Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, "I believe; help my unbelief!" [25] And when Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "You mute and deaf spirit, I command you, come out of him and never enter him again."

Jesus is all like, "What do you mean? If I can? Believe!" And I love the honesty of the man's response: "I do believe! But help my unbelief." I do believe! And I don't believe as strongly as I probably should! Help me with that! And Jesus heals the boy.

The reason I love this passage so much is because the father here encapsulates so much of my personal experience, and what I think is the Christian experience as a whole. Like we're this mixed bag of belief and disbelief, right? A mixed bag of Jesus I trust you... and Jesus, I really struggle to trust you. A mixed bag of faith... and doubt.

So, for the past 3 weeks, we've been looking at some of the rationale behind Christian belief - that though sometimes it can feel crazy, it's not actually crazy to be a Christian. But, today I want to do something a little bit different.

Instead of talking about reasons why we can be confident about what we believe... I want us to talk about doubt and how we as believers can handle it.

And here's why: I think to live in the 21st Century in the United States of America - even here in a geographical and cultural location often referred to as the Bible-belt - in order to make it as a Christian, you're going to have to know how to handle doubt.

Here's what I mean, at the very heart of our collective national story - and I understand that's a very broad brush to paint with, but grant me some leeway here - at the very heart of the American story lies an ideology of progress and deconstruction - to tear down what is unhelpful or unhealthy - such as overreaching and unfair governments - like the crown in Britain in the 18th century - in the hope of creating a better future. This is what our country was founded on.

And, so sorta built into our collective consciousness is this value to not just accept the status quo or the way things are but to question it - to tear it down if necessary - and try to build something better. To approach “what is” with a “who says it has to be this way?” mentality.

And, truth be told, this has led to many wonderful, wonderful things - that I, for one, am grateful to God for here.

- Things like **freedom of religion** - we don't have a governmental authority trying to force religious adherence down our throats but can worship freely.
- Things like the **civil rights movement and gender equality** - and look I know we've still got a long, long, long way to go in those areas - but its this ethos that made the ground we've gained here possible. There are things that absolutely need to be deconstructed so that they could be built up into something stronger and more in line with the biblical vision of human flourishing.

However, our cultural current also brings along with it certain difficulties. Latent within it are natural dispositions towards distrust and skepticism - especially towards figures of authority - political, social, religious and ideological - and often it brings more of a desire to tear things down than build them up.

- So, along with great progress in some areas, we've simultaneously seen the rise in things like **“postmodernism”** - which holds a general suspicion of truth claims - and though most academics and philosophers have abandoned this ideology, it's massively popular in the wider culture
- then there's the rising **polarization** we see in our political and social discourse - this especially clear this time of year as we get into an election cycle - each side can't stop pointing at the other like their the greatest threat to human existence since the bubonic plague. And you should never trust or believe a word that comes out of the opposing party's mouth.
- We have a **suspicion that most public figures** have scandal somewhere in their closet, and a distrust for institutions, **especially big corporations** that we believe are attempting to manipulate us for their own bottom line.

By and large, attitudes of doubt and skepticism dominate our brainwaves.

And none of that is necessarily wrong or immoral - but it does **put us in a very unique cultural moment**. We are set up to be skeptical, cynical and have doubt towards everything - including God. And so, if we're going faithfully follow Jesus here - we're going to need to know how to handle doubt because it's going to come at us - whether that be through personally struggling with it... or just caring about a friend, or neighbor, or co-worker who does.

So, I just want to give us some help today to understand and deal with doubt. I want to show you 3 things about the nature of doubt and how we can handle them...

1.) **At its core, doubt is, simply, disguised belief.**

When we think about doubt or skepticism, we tend to put it on a spectrum with faith at one end and rationality at the other. And doubt or skepticism fall on the rational end of that spectrum. But that's not really how it works.

Michael Polanyi is a Hungarian-British scholar, described as a polymath - which I didn't know what that was when I read it - so I did a little digging and found out it means that he's basically a know-it-all, but the kind of know-it-all you like. A poly-math is a person who has expertise in a wide variety of fields and draws on that expertise to solve specific complex problems.

But all that being said, **Polanyi** wrote a philosophical work called *Personal Knowledge* with a chapter called “The Critique of Doubt”. And here's what he argued: **“Skeptical doubt always contains an element of belief. Doubt and belief are ultimately equivalent... The doubting of an explicit statement denies [one]**

belief ... in favor of other beliefs which are not doubted for the time being.”¹

Essentially, belief and doubt are two sides of the same coin. Whenever you doubt one belief, you are alternatively choosing to believe - or rather not doubt - other beliefs. Another way of saying that is that all doubts, no matter how skeptical or cynical they may seem, are just alternate beliefs.

So, for example, if you have a doubt that says, “I don’t think my team can win the championship this year.” That means you conversely believe that there are better teams out there that will win.

If you have a doubt that says, “I don’t think it’s possible that the world is flat.” That means you conversely believe, “I have enough information out there to prove that the Earth is some other shape... like round.”

And this same principle applies to our beliefs, thoughts and doubts about God.

So for example, we can’t say, “I don’t think anyone can know enough to be certain about God” without at the same time believing that you have enough knowledge about the nature of religious knowledge to be certain about that claim!

Now, none of that is necessarily all that profound or insightful, until we realize that the problem is if both are beliefs - we tend not scrutinize them equally. We tend to doubt our “beliefs”... but never doubt our doubts. To never ask any questions about our doubts - to never say, “Okay, if I doubt that _____ is true... this means I believe _____. Does that hold up? Is that reasonable based on what I know?”

This is partly what Jesus is exposing to the father in Mark 9 when he says, “*If I can?!*” Essentially, do you see what you are actually believing right now? Does that line up with what is true - that anything is possible for those who believe?” **He points out the misguided belief behind the doubt.**

So, I’ll give you another example to help you see this in our context. There is a British actor and writer named Stephen Fry. He is a very entertaining human being and a very popular atheist. In defense of his atheism, he once said, “*Atheism is not just about not believing there is a God, but on the assumption that if there is one, what kind of God is He? It’s perfectly apparent. He’s monstrous. Utterly monstrous.*”² And he goes on to cite the existence of suffering and evil as lock-tight arguments that God doesn’t exist, and if, by chance He did, you shouldn’t worry about him or going to heaven when you die because He’s obviously not good or worthy to be worshipped - so who would want to spend eternity with that anyway.

What he’s expressing is a very, very powerful doubt. And to be fair, there is a lot there worthy to be considered and shouldn’t be easily dismissed, but it is also a doubt full of hidden beliefs.

If we were to apply a little bit of scrutiny, we’d find that it’s not as lock-tight as it first appears. We’d realize the belief behind the doubt is: “If there is an all-knowing, sovereign God whom I can hold accountable for suffering, this God couldn’t possibly have reasons to allow it that I can’t see. Furthermore, I believe I actually can see and know enough to hold this God accountable.”

Well, now, wait a minute. Does that hold up? No... it doesn’t... of course, an all-knowing, sovereign God could have justifiable reasons that I don’t understand. And, of course, I don’t see or know everything. So, that’s not really a reason to believe He doesn’t exist.

But, then you could also take it another layer down. Not only does it believe that I have enough knowledge, but it also believes that God hasn’t done anything to respond or fix the evil and suffering we see in the world. But, according to the Christian tradition, that doesn’t hold up either - in fact, it’s at the very heart of what Christians believe - that God entered into history as Jesus to reverse the curse of sin...

¹ Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, p. 272

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-suvkwNYSQo>

and all the suffering and evil along with it.

And, of course, none of that is to say that there isn't genuinely something to wrestle with when it comes to the problem of pain and suffering in the world - there certainly is - but it is to show that every doubt - however powerful it may seem - is a belief with problems of its own - that deserves the same scrutiny.

So, simply, one way to handle **doubt is to doubt it. We ought to doubt our doubts.**

Bring the same scrutiny your doubts bring to faith in Jesus to your doubts themselves. Identify what the alternate belief is and investigate it. See if it holds up with what you know to be true, and what the Scriptures actually say of Jesus.

If you doubt God's love for you... that means you believe God hasn't done anything to show you He loves you? Does that hold up? Do you have evidence for that? If you doubt God's existence, you believe you've seen enough evidence to make that conclusion... Is that true? Is there evidence that might disagree with you? Perhaps you'll come to the same conclusion... but we shouldn't trust our doubts implicitly.

And that brings me to #2...

2.) The reality is many, if not most, **doubts are socially formed**

In every culture, no matter what or where the culture is, including our own certain things are normalized and socialized into us unbeknownst to us. The American drive, I mentioned earlier, for progress and autonomy is a great example, but I'll give you another.

Noda. Many of you know our FoC is preparing to plant a new church in Charlotte. A while back, some of our pastors and Tim - our church planter - went up on a visit to pray and get a vision for what the church could be. And they went to a particularly hip part of town called Noda - which is basically Charlotte's art district - they call it the city's "epicenter for inspiration."³

So, it's a very quirky and expressive side of town that you can tell highly values self-expression and individual freedom. Not all that unlike 5 points or State St. here in our area. And while they were there they realized - and perhaps you've had this experience, too - that while the community obviously valued these ideals... everyone they saw was dressed exactly the same. Same skinny jeans... same scarves... same outrageously big hats that serve no functional purpose. And it begged the question, "Why does everyone's self-expression look the exact same?"

In the pursuit of being "authentic", all they really did was throw off one set of social norms to step into another. And look, hipsters are easy to pick on, but we all do it - do you think I drive a truck and enjoy sitting in a tree with a gun because it's the true expression of my inner self? No... I *do* enjoy those things, but I enjoy them because I learned to enjoy them from being around others who enjoy them. I'm a product of the people I'm around.

But this also happens on much deeper levels. I read a fascinating article recently that referenced research about the power of social networks. The researchers found that "If a friend of yours becomes obese, you yourself are 45 percent more likely than chance to gain weight over the next two to four years. More surprisingly, however ... if a friend of your friend becomes obese, your likelihood of gaining weight increases by about 20 percent — even if you don't know that friend of a friend."⁴

That's wild! The same principle held true for smoking, and general rates of happiness. The point was that you and I are being socialized and influenced by people we've never met in ways that are almost impossible for us to see. And this is happening with our beliefs and doubts as well:

³ <https://www.charlottesgotalot.com/neighborhoods/noda>

⁴ <https://medium.com/the-mission/youre-not-the-average-of-the-five-people-you-surround-yourself-with-f21b817f6e69>

Pastor and author **Tim Keller** explains it like this - “To move from religion to secularism is not so much a loss of faith as a shift into a new set of beliefs and into a new community of faith, one that draws the lines between orthodoxy and heresy in different places.”⁵

His point is that when we shift away from religious faith to non-religious faith, we generally aren’t moving from a faith community into personal enlightenment - but it’s really just moving from one faith community into another.

Though we like to think of ourselves as mainly the product of our own decisions and choices, such is not the case. We are all a product of the people and environment around us.

Sometimes this is overt and we can see it clearly like the hipsters from Noda - many will proudly declare on social media or wherever, “this is who I am. This is what I believe -- I don’t care what others think. I only care what I think.” But we quickly see that all that has happened is they’ve traded one community and set of cheerleaders for another. Sometimes it’s more subtle. The dominant doubts from our culture just surround us from what we see, hear and read and it’s not that we’ve traded one set of cheerleaders for another, but our former belief just “doesn’t feel right anymore.”

In Romans 1, the text we looked at to start this series 4 weeks ago, Paul starts his arguments about the existence of God with the words, *“I am not ashamed of the gospel.”*

This kind of goes without saying, but the only reason for Paul to mention that he is not ashamed of the gospel is that there is some pressure on him or on his audience to feel shame about the gospel. For Paul’s audience in Rome, it was likely persecution in the form of harassment, beatings, imprisonment and/or death.

And while we might not have to expect the same in our cultural moment, a tension still exists. Trusting and following Jesus may get you looked at funny and ostracized in some social circles. You might get called intolerant or accused of being on the wrong side of history.

And if you pay careful attention, you’ll find that many of our doubts tend to move in the same direction as the beliefs presented to us from our social media and television and song... things like...

- “You don’t have to believe in God to be a good person or live a full meaningful life!”
- “If you’re not hurting anyone, you should be free to do what you want. Anything or anyone - including a god - that restricts you isn’t on your side. It’s just oppressive.”
- “A judging god would be an unloving god.”

Almost everyone in our culture who walks away from Jesus eventually ends up coming to the same conclusion about these things. And whether we know it or not, we end up just being the hipster from NoDa. All wearing the same outrageous hat of doubt thinking we’ve become enlightened. But, we fail to see that our culture and environment actually played a role in it.

I recently read the story of a guy who became a Christian from an atheistic background. In his story, he was recounting some of his journey from skepticism to faith in Jesus and this is actually one of the things he brought up. He said one of his biggest doubts about Christianity and belief in God in general was this view that if God existed he was unfair to cast judgement on humans. But, that all changed when he found himself with a Chinese friend who also didn’t believe in God but who said that, if he existed, God certainly would have a right to judge people as he saw fit. It popped a circuit in his brain. He began to realize his doubt about judgement and hell was based on a white, Western, democratic, individualistic mindset that most other people in the world didn’t share.

⁵ Keller, *Making Sense of God: Finding God in the Modern World*, p. 30.

In his words, not mine, he said “To insist that the universe be run like a Western democracy was actually a very ethnocentric point of view.” And while this wasn’t the final nail in the coffin for him coming to faith, he said what did do was help him begin to realize his issues with God were actually more of a product of his culture than they were from anything within himself.

So, when it comes to our doubts, we need to be in the habit of what the scriptures call “renewing our minds.”

Romans 12:2 Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. (NIV)

We need to recognize there is a pressure on you to live, think and believe certain ways - the way that the rest of the world around you lives, thinks and believes. And counteract by intentionally setting our minds the things of God - through his Word, and his people, and his Spirit. This is where it comes back down to what we say all the time: : **The things you do, do things to you.**

I had a buddy not long ago tell me, “Yeah, I’m not a Christian anymore.” I asked him what brought him there and he said, “Well, I’ve just been reading a lot of non-Christian thinkers and I find their arguments compelling.” So I asked, “Well, have you been reading any Christian thinkers to see both sides of the argument?” His response, “No.” And so I said, “So, what exactly were you expecting to happen?”

If you only surround yourself with doubting or deconstructing voices, you’re going to become a doubting/deconstructing person. Your doubts are going to feel like the only thing that makes sense.

If, hypothetically, all I do is listen to podcast after podcast of “ex-Christians” airing out all their issues with Christianity assuming it won’t have any impact on me... and at the same time avoid community, avoid reading the Bible and prayer. That’s going to shape you.

The things you do, the habits you form, the stuff you watch or read, and the voices you surround yourself with - have an impact on you. And I’m not saying don’t ever do anything or listen to anything that challenges your faith - that’s silly - but I am saying don’t be so naive to assume that things you do will do nothing to your soul. It’s going to shape you.

Your habits reinforce your beliefs. This is a sad truth: in my experience, people who have gone through intense doubting to the point of deciding not to follow Jesus anymore - had stopped following Jesus long before their doubts took over. 99.9% of the time they had already given up cultivating their soul for long prolonged seasons.

It didn’t happen overnight. There was already a slow regression of no longer spending time with God through his Word and prayer. There was already a pulling back from Christian community and Gatherings because of “I’m tired” or “the kids had a long weekend” or “works just been demanding lately.”

And the truth is: you don’t have to do anything intentional for this to happen. Doubt and deconstruction are what our culture does. I joked with one of our members before this series saying I wanted the subtitle to be: “Helping you deal with your facebook feed.” Because doubt is everywhere. You don’t have to disciple doubt. But we do have to be intentional about hearing a voice in the other direction.

3.) Doubts aren’t neutral.

Later in that same passage in Romans, Paul gives us massive insight into our doubt. He says in v. 18 - “We suppress the truth in our unrighteousness.” Essentially, as individuals, we aren’t neutral. We aren’t unbiased. And neither are the doubts we struggle with. We are wired to be particularly tempted by doubts - especially doubts that seem to be giving us the freedom to define right and wrong for ourselves, to do what we want when we want it, and give us a moral cover for our own unrighteousness.

Near the end of WWII, the first town with a concentration camp that the Allied forces liberated was a town called Ohrdruf, Germany. The Nazis tried to get rid of any evidence of the camp, but the Allied soldiers got there before they could do this. American GI's witnessed hundreds of dead bodies. It was the first concentration camp that they had seen.

A few hours later, General Patton arrived and promptly vomited upon witnessing the scene. The next day, Patton brought the mayor of Ohrdruf and his wife to see for themselves what they had to have known what was happening in their town. He ordered the mayor and every able-bodied person in the town to dig graves for the massacred.

After they dug the graves and conducted a funeral for the deceased, Patton found out that the mayor and his wife hung themselves. Before their death, they left a note that read, "We didn't know... but we knew."

That is a pretty haunting picture - that we could know... but not know because we don't want to know. That's exactly what Paul is saying here in Romans 1. We aren't neutral to the claims of Christianity. We aren't neutral to what the Scriptures say. There is something in us that wants it to not be true. Sometimes we're overt with it. Sometimes it's more subtle. But there is something down in us that wants to be convinced that the claims of Christianity are not real.

You might remember Thomas Nagel, the American atheist philosopher, we quoted in week 1 who said, "In speaking of the fear of religion, I don't mean to refer to the entirely reasonable hostility toward certain established religions and religious institutions, in virtue of their objectionable moral doctrines, social policies, and political influence. Nor am I referring to the association of many religious beliefs with superstition and the acceptance of evident empirical falsehoods. I am talking about something much deeper—namely, the fear of religion itself. I speak from experience, being strongly subject to this fear myself: I want atheism to be true and am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. It isn't just that I don't believe in God and, naturally, hope that I'm right in my belief. It's that I hope there is no God! I don't want there to be a God; I don't want the universe to be like that."

Incredible honesty that I think cuts at the heart of much doubt - there is this thing inside of us that really doesn't want this to be true... because we know if it is true it would mean dramatic things for our lives and perhaps force us to deal with some really uncomfortable things.

And none of that is to say that anyone who has doubt is only fooling themselves and being dishonest about their hang-ups. No, that's not the case at all. But, it is simply to say that the idea that we are strictly neutral, logical creatures who can just look at the facts and come to purely logical conclusions is fantasy.

We are a mixed bag of rationality and bias - most often bias towards personal comfort, autonomy, and control. Sometimes we're like the father in Mark 9 and our doubts are influenced by our pain - things did not go the way we thought they would or should... God didn't do the thing we expected him to and now seeds of doubt are within us. Whatever it may be for you - the point is none of us are disconnected and neutral. We all have skin in the game.

And all that means, when it comes to how we handle doubt - it means we gotta handle it with a bit of self-awareness. Recognizing that we aren't necessarily as trustworthy as we think we are. To be honest about our motivations and desires. To be honest about what might lay at the root of our disbelief.

So what should we do? **Take your doubts to Jesus**

Here's the truth: Doubt is not something that a believer needs to run away from.

Tim Keller, again, says it well in his book *Reason for God*, “A faith without some doubts is like a human body without any antibodies. People who blithely go through life too busy or indifferent to ask hard questions about why they believe as they do will find themselves defenseless against either the experience of tragedy or the probing questions of a smart skeptic. A person’s faith can collapse almost overnight if she has failed over the years to listen patiently to her own doubts, which should only be discarded after long reflection... Only if you struggle long and hard with objections to your faith will you be able to provide grounds for your beliefs to skeptics, including yourself, that are plausible rather than ridiculous or offensive.”⁶

I love that. Sometimes doubt is the very thing you need. Sometimes doubt can be the very thing God uses to strengthen and revitalize our faith... but only if we’re honest enough to come to Him with them.

Like the father for his son, you can come to Jesus crying, “I believe, but help my unbelief!”

Because here’s the thing... God is big enough to handle your doubt. Your doubt doesn’t scare him.

I think one of the big reasons people stop following Jesus when they have doubts is because they wrongly believe that they have to have everything figured out before approaching Him. We believe we’ve got to get this difficulty - whatever it is - straightened out in our head *first* and *then* we can come to Jesus.

But the truth is Jesus meets us where we are. Like he met the boy’s father where he was in the midst of his doubt. This is, in fact, the good news of the gospel - it’s God’s grace that saves us and sustains us.

- not our ability to figure it out all
- not our ability to reach some form of doubtless existence
- not even getting to a point where we can intellectually defend our faith in the face of the most rigorous criticisms...

Grace. Grace for any and all who would come to him - even those of us with that inward bent to not want it to be true like you and me.

Because at the end of the day, you aren’t saved by the strength of your faith. You are saved by the strength of the one you have faith in - no matter how fragile or weak that faith may feel to you.

So, doubt your doubts, bring them to Jesus and let his grace to pull you through.

Pray

⁶ Keller, *Reason for God*, p. ivii