

WHEN YOU CAN'T RUN AWAY FROM YOUR MOST TROUBLING THOUGHTS - Part Three

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DOUBTS CAUSED BY A LACK OF COMMITMENT

We're continuing our series on the dark thoughts of doubt. One of the things making doubt such a difficult problem to diagnose is the many different **types** of doubt that can affect the Christian mind.

For example, last week we studied doubts arising from a faith lacking foundations. People can know **what** they believe in terms of the **content** of their faith, but have little idea about **why** they believe what they believe. And remember, if you can't give a **why** to your faith, you will never be able to give a **why not** to your doubts. That's why Peter says we must always be ready to give a **reason** for our faith - not a **recitation** of the **content** of our faith (**1 Peter 3:15**). Why do you hold **Christian** beliefs rather than a host of others?

These intellectual doubts are the kind of doubts we are most familiar with. We usually think of doubt as being rooted in an **intellectual** or **mental** setting. Doubts, we feel, have their seat in the **mind**. And many times that is the case. But not always.

Today we're looking at doubts that are caused, not by a lack of **logic**, but by a lack of **commitment**. This kind of doubt is particularly sinister because we are usually unaware of its presence until its hold on our life is emptying our faith of all joy and strength. This is, perhaps, the most **unanalyzed** doubt.

For all these reasons it's crucial we have a good understanding of **doubts that come from a lack of commitment**:

1) TO UNDERSTAND THIS KIND OF DOUBT WE NEED TO CLEARLY DEFINE THE NATURE OF GENUINE NEW TESTAMENT FAITH

Here is one of the most important distinctions you can recognize. Empty casual religionists simply choose **Jesus Christ**. Faithful disciples commit themselves to the **consequences** of choosing Jesus Christ. There is all the difference in the world between those two concepts. Biblical faith is committing yourself to the **consequences** of choosing Christ.

In other words, you can't **inherit** genuine faith from anyone else. Faith always involves personal **choice**. By nature faith is costly. It selects Christ as Lord only by **de-selecting** all other options of life allegiance. There is nothing **passive** about authentic faith. Faith is living by the **consequences** of our professed beliefs. By definition, commitment must be **yours** and **yours alone**.

A good Biblical definition of genuine faith is this: **Faith is obedience to the truth - "Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart...."(1 Peter 1:22)**. Notice those words, **"by your obedience to the truth..."** That's what faith is. In other words, genuine faith has not really been exercised until, **not only the choice, but the consequences of the choice** have been fully embraced by the will.

Knowing the truth isn't faith. Knowing the truth is what **makes room** for faith. But it's not faith in itself. Knowing the truth, and **choosing to live by the consequences of that truth** is New Testament faith.

And here's how all this relates to doubt. Until a person **chooses the consequences** of his beliefs personally - until he **pays the price of his faith with his daily choices** - he has not yet enabled the power of the Spirit of God in his life. You see, the kind of commitment we're describing here is not some **deeper grasp or level of faith**. This is the **entry point** to saving faith. This is genuine faith right at the **threshold** of the Christian experience.

2) **WHEN THIS COMMITMENT TO THE CONSEQUENCES OF OUR BELIEFS IS LACKING, DOUBTS FROM A LACK OF COMMITMENT WILL HOLLOW OUT THE BELIEVER'S EXPERIENCE**

It's important to remember that, initially, this kind of doubt never manifests itself **intellectually**. That is, the person doesn't question the **truthfulness** of the beliefs he holds. That's not the problem.

In fact, these kinds of doubts don't **scream for attention**. This is a slippery kind of doubt, with no sharp corners to get a hold of. Frequently, the individual doesn't even know **why** he feels the way he feels.

- a) Usually there is only one initial symptom kept locked up deep in the heart. The only word for it is a gnawing sense of the **unreality** of God. The beliefs are held, but they all **feel** empty. You feel like a person walking around with a wallet full of foreign currency. It does nothing for you.

Os Guinness says **weak convictions are like a slipping clutch**. The car has gas. The driver is experienced. The motor is good. The engine starts and revs. But the whole thing doesn't **engage**. It's just not going anywhere. It makes no difference.

This is the exact problem with this kind of doubt. The person **believes** the truth. He **knows** the doctrines. He **attends** the church. He **professes** faith outwardly. But his life isn't **engaged** in the truth. The whole endeavor seems empty and powerless.

- b) If the first symptom is **unreality** the second will soon be **guilt**. After a while there begins to grow a painful, inward sense of phoniness and failure. That's because we can **see** the other Christians around us. **Their** faith seems to work for **them**. We want to make **ours** work for **us**. And every time it doesn't we sink a little lower into despair.

This is the real dilemma of these doubts. The person believes his religious ideas are right and good. He just doesn't regularly put them to work. Guilt grows during the silent incubation period of this kind of doubt.

- c) The final stage in this kind of doubt is **unbelief**. Please don't miss the connection between the **kind** of doubt we're dealing with and the **final condition** of unbelief in the doubter. In a way, this is the most **dishonest** form of doubt. There was never anything wrong with the truth or power of the Christian life. The message was true, Jesus was alive and real, and God was loving and gracious all along.

Then **what went wrong?** Here is the key truth to doubts caused by lack of commitment.

Uncommitted belief leads to committed unbelief. Because the person refused to commit to the **consequences** of their choice to follow Christ, they must somehow save face at the last minute.

Rather than pointing the finger of blame at their own **lack of responsibility**, they will **turn their back upon the faith in unbelief**. But the problem isn't that there **isn't enough truth to merit belief**. The problem is they **never committed their will to the truth they knew**.

So I hope you're carefully following the flow of today's study. First, **faith is a commitment to the consequences of our choice to believe in Christ**. In that sense, faith is always **in process** - always **ongoing**. Faith is **obedience to the truth we know**. There is no other kind of faith. Until this commitment to obedience is radically made New Testament faith hasn't been exercised. A person may **think** they have faith in Jesus but until they are committed to the personal **consequences** of that choice in daily living they haven't exercised faith at all.

And what is the alternative to faith? There's only one - **unbelief**. Unbelief is the only possible end for the person who empties his life of genuine faith. But the problem never was with the **worthiness** of the faith. The problem was doubts took over because of a lack of commitment to the **consequences** of the choice to believe.

3) FAITH IS BEST SHARPENED WHEN WE FACE THE CHALLENGE TO MAKE OUR CONVICTIONS OUR OWN

Here's a life principle. **Nothing authenticates the power of faith like paying the price of owning it**. Soak your mind in the clear examples we have of genuine, personal, powerful convictions in the Scriptures:

Joshua 24:15 - "And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, **whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell**. But as for me and my house, **we will serve the LORD.**"

Joshua calls the people to make their **actions** line up with their **profession**. In other words, he's calling the people to commit themselves to the **consequences** of their choice to follow God.

But the significant point to note is this. After he challenges them, **before they even make their response**, Joshua commits himself. He doesn't even know if they're coming with him. **And it doesn't matter**. His mind is made up. Whatever **they** decide, **he and his house** have already make their decision.

Daniel 3:16-18 - "Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered and said to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. [17] If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. [18] **But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.**"

Again, this is a revelation of genuine, **personal** conviction. Three against thousands. Three against the empire. Three facing possible extinction in a furnace of fire. Faith love to play against those odds. They not only know what they **believe**. They are prepared to live by the **consequences** of the choice they have made.

2 Timothy 1:12 - "**...which is why I suffer as I do**. But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have

believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me.”

That opening phrase is strange: “...***which is why I suffer as I do.***” “Why Paul? Why do you suffer as you do?” You have to back up into the context of those words - **Verses 10-11** - “...and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel, [11] for which I was appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher, **which is why I suffer as I do....**”

This is Paul writing from prison. He faces execution. He doesn't know how many more days he has. But he's not about to back down or change his mind or mission. Whatever the future holds, he lives by the ***consequences*** of his choice to follow Jesus. He did it publicly. And now he's the same person with the same convictions when he's all alone.

We need those examples to ***re-teach*** our casual minds what real conviction of faith is. ***No conviction is truly your own until you are prepared to stand against the whole world to maintain it.*** Until you will stand up to anyone who tries to weaken or modify your Christian faith, your faith is not your own. You're just ***trying it on for show.***

And here's the point to this study about doubt. Until your faith is more than a convenient way of having your sins pardoned, you will never find reality and power in it. You'll find yourself professing a faith verbally while, at other times, you feel like a spectator looking at the faith from the outside. You'll feel like you're ***up on the stage*** and ***sitting in the audience*** at the same time. But don't kid yourself. The flaw isn't in the faith. It's in your commitment.

God tests the strength of our personal convictions almost daily. He does this not to give ***Himself*** more information about ***us***, but to give ***us*** more information about ***ourselves***. In other words, this is a manifestation of His mercy.

Personal convictions are challenged primarily in three ways in today's world:

- a) ***Personal convictions are tested by the relentless pursuit of relativism.*** It would not be an exaggeration to say that relativism is the birthmark of the spirit of the age. More than anything else, ***relativism***, under the falsely defines guise of ***tolerance***, is at the heart of the ***spirit of anti-Christ*** the apostle John wrote about.

Relativism is not the same as ***open-mindedness***. Open-mindedness says, ***‘I will look at all the options before I make up my mind.’*** Relativism says, ***‘All the choices are morally equal and valid.’***

Nothing cuts the legs out from under the Christian faith like relativism. You don't have to ***deny*** the faith to ***destroy*** it. You simply have to put it on an equal footing with all competing world views. Relativism destroys faith silently - without an obvious fight.

I love this quote from ***G.K.Chesterton*** as he once wrote of ***H.G.Wells***, ***“He thought that the object of opening the mind is simply opening the mind. Whereas I am incurably convinced that the object of opening the mind, as of opening the mouth for food, is to shut it again on something solid.”***

Christian student, go to every class knowing you will be taught by a relativist. Understand the only sin left is **intolerance**. No one will mind Christianity as your **opinion**. But they will hate it as your **conviction**.

b) ***Personal convictions are tested by the power of “group-think.”***

Nothing tests the reality of personal convictions like your response to the pressure of the group to not **live** by them. Anybody can hold personal convictions of faith when they're alone reading their Bible. But you can't live your life all alone. **People, even your church-going peers, tend to shove your convictions around.**

And here's the point, **you measure your real convictions by what it takes to bump them.** Here's what happens in a group. The desire to be **socially loved and admired** crashes head on with **the desire to please Jesus Christ as Lord personally**. And nothing weakens the desire to please Jesus Christ personally more than the desire to be loved and admired socially.

Jesus addressed this problem with tearful pointedness: **John 5:44** - **“How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?”**

If receiving **glory** (admiration - approval) from your **peers** is more important to you than receiving **glory** (admiration - approval) from your **Lord**, you will never be able to live by your convictions. And remember, that's what faith **is**. **It's not believing your convictions. It's living by the consequences of your convictions.**

c) ***Personal convictions are tested by society's hardening attitude toward dominant Christian principles***

This world is getting **less and less tolerant** - or, to put it another way - more **intolerant** of people who truly live by dominating Christian principles. Because we are forced by Biblical revelation to believe in **absolute sin**, and we live in a world **committed to sinning**, we are naturally viewed as intolerant. And this world won't **tolerate** people whom it views as intolerant.

This situation isn't going to get **better**. It's going to get **worse - much** worse. I'm afraid for people who can't stand to come out of the crowd and stake their own personal claim on the basis of Biblical revelation. Holding the Christian faith has come pretty cheap for years now. But it will soon cost tears and blood to declare a faith in Christ as Lord. Jesus said this was the very conflict that would usher in His Second Coming.

4) **AS WE CHOOSE NOW, SO WE WILL BE THEN**

You don't get ready for the future by thinking just about the **future**. You get ready for the future by the choices you make **now**. As you live **now**, so you will be **then** when Jesus actually comes again.

Remember, faith isn't defined by what you **believe**. Faith is defined by what you **choose**. And **future** choices are shaped by **present** ones. What you choose **now** is what you will be **then**:

Revelation 22:7-12 - "And behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book." [8] I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I heard and saw them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who showed them to me, [9] but he said to me, "You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers the prophets, and with those who keep the words of this book. Worship God." [10] And he said to me, "Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near. [11] Let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy." [12] "Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one for what he has done.

Individual destiny isn't settled **by** the events of the end times. People are merely **locked into what they already were** by the running out of the clock. Their **previous choices** created their destiny.

Here's my closing point: **Remember that the stakes of faith are getting higher. Take every opportunity to deepen the reality of your convictions by putting more on the line than ever before.**

Many years ago **C. S. Lewis** penned these words of strong warning to the church: "Remember, your bid will not be serious if nothing much is staked on it. And you will never discover **how** serious it is until the stakes are raised horribly high - until you find that you are playing, not for counters or sixpences, but for every penny you have in the world. Nothing less will shake a man - or at least a man like me - out of his merely verbal thinking and his merely notional beliefs. He has to be knocked silly before he comes to his senses. Only pressure will bring out the truth."

That's what's happening with your life and mine. That's what the **temptation of the secret moment**, and the **pressure of the crowd** are all about. God wants to see you put your money where your mouth is. **He wants to make you into an outstanding Christian.**

And nothing will erase the doubts from lack of commitment from your heart like doubling your bet on your convictions. **Lean** on your faith. **Live** by the **consequences** of your beliefs. Assurance and power will grow each passing day.