

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

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DOUBTS CAUSED BY A FAILURE TO GROW

I can still remember the first time (in fact the **only** time) I got up on a pair of skis behind a boat. You try so hard for so long just to get up that, after a while, you begin to think all you have to do is get up on your skis and you'll be laughing. You struggle and wobble and swallow half the lake just trying to **get up out of the water**.

Then you make a discovery. Once you **get up** you can't stop thinking. You have to **stay up**. I can still remember that momentary feeling of complete victory as I actually stood up on those skis. The lake was my oyster. But I had been concentrating so hard on **getting up** that I hadn't thought in advance about the next obvious question: **Now that I'm up, what do I do next?** How do I turn? What do I do with these bumpy waves? Why do my legs feel like rubber?

That's as far as I got with the questions in my mind because the next thing I knew I was bobbing for minnows.

Many of the doubts we've studied in this series have to do with problems believers face **getting started** in the Christian life. We saw that sometimes they never lay a proper foundation of understanding. Because they never established a **"why"** for their faith they never had a good **"why not"** for their doubts.

Sometimes they never make a clean break with patterns of thought and behavior they entrenched long before they were converted. Their newly professed faith in Jesus seems weak and diluted because it never took hold in a **renewed** mind - just a **patched** mind, divided by a sterile mix of old and new affections and priorities. And a **double-minded** faith will never be strong, no matter how much religion gets squirted over the top.

But this week, and last, we're concentrating on particular forms of doubt that arise **after** faith is professed. These are what we could call **"maintenance doubts"** rather than **"start-up doubts."**

Today we're looking at doubts that come from a **lack of growth**. And we need to start by remembering perhaps the most important fact about the very **nature** of authentic faith:

Some things, just because of what they are, need to be **moving forward** in order to work. Do you remember when you first learned to ride a bike? One of the cardinal rules is you have to **keep moving**. A bike, just because it's a bike, won't work standing still. If your plan is to sit still, you need a **chair**, not a **bike**. A bike **only** works moving forward.

This is the bed-rock principle in understanding the Christian life. If faith is **ever** reduced to a **one-time decision** - **"accepting Jesus as Savior"** - it is doomed to emptiness and failure. Like a bike, faith must be kept active and moving or it simply ceases to function at all.

And there's another important point to be made from the bike illustration. What would you say to a person who was trying to sit on the bike standing still? You watch him fall over and over, repeatedly scraping up his knees and elbows. Finally, as you watch through the window, he comes running into the house screaming, **"That's the most useless bike I've ever seen! I don't know why anyone bothers with those things. They just don't work!"**

You'd probably try to point out that actually there was nothing at all wrong with the bike. The bike wasn't broken or useless. The bike will work just fine as long as you remember it's a **bike** and not a **chair**.

I wonder how many Christians lament about their faith like the child railed against the bike. I wonder how many Christians find their faith wobbly and unsubstantial and, in a quiet, inwardly polite way, question the value of their **faith** instead of their failure to **use** their faith properly.

For many Christians the problem isn't that their faith is **useless**, just **unused**. Those are two very different things. There are many Christians, now in their forties, who **think** they have decided their faith isn't as valid as it used to be. Perhaps they think they have **reached a point in life where their faith is no longer relevant**. But that's not what has happened at all. What has happened is very different. They have moved on and grown and matured in every area of life **but** their faith. Then they wonder why their faith doesn't **fit** anymore with all the other areas of their lives that have grown and matured. The **issues** of daily life got bigger while their **faith** remained the same size. This **naturally** makes their faith **feel** small and irrelevant.

The truth of their situation is actually very different than they suppose. Their faith feels **useless** because it hasn't been

applied on a consistent basis. What they're **calling** their faith hasn't been genuine faith, perhaps for years. What they presently have **isn't** living faith. It's just a **memory** of the faith they used to maintain and apply.

But here's the point to re-emphasize. Just as we saw in the illustration with the bike, there is nothing wrong with the faith itself. The truths of the faith are no less true than before. God is no less real. No argument has been marshalled to rob the heart of confidence in God.

That is not how this kind of doubt grows and kidnaps the heart. The process is much more silent and gradual. Doubt from a lack of growth is the **polite** and gradual way a careless Christian simply **shelves** a living faith when he doesn't want to live up to its demands. He may think that by never actually **denying** the faith he is somehow in better spiritual shape. But this is a delusion. By not **choosing** to move forward in faith a silent **vote for unbelief** has already been cast in smaller, gradual degrees.

1) IF FAITH IS NOT CONSTANTLY EXERCISED AND NOURISHED IT WILL NEVER SEEM REAL TO ITS POSSESSOR

No book deals more directly with this issue than the book of James. The real contrast in the book of James isn't, as many people falsely assume, between faith and works. That's not the issue James deals with at all. The book of James really deals with the kind of issue we're studying today - the issue of living faith contrasted with the memory of faith long deceased:

James 2:14-20 - "What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? [15] If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, [16] and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? [17] So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. [18] But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. [19] You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! [20] Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless?"

Note that last word and you'll see the issue clearly - **useless** faith. Like the child who stomped away from the bike on the driveway because it wouldn't stand up. This is a person who has come to the place where he simply has no way of establishing the reality of his faith because he is not **using** it in his daily actions and choices as it was meant to be used.

So James states the obvious. **Of course that kind of faith is going to seem useless.** But it **isn't** useless due to some actual deficiency in its **object**. It's simply **unused**. It has become nothing more than a set of **memorized statements of beliefs**. But because it isn't **geared** into life, it no longer seems **relevant** to life. And no intelligent person will long devote himself to something he deems irrelevant.

So James has a perfect term to describe the person who uses his faith like a chair rather than a bike - **James 1:7-8** - "For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; [8] he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways."

"**Double-minded**" is the perfect term. It's not that the unused faith is **denied**. This person isn't an atheist. Rather, because the faith is **inactive** - because it only exists as an idea in the **mind** - it is powerless to **dominate** the whole life. The actual **direction** of the life is determined by another, more dominant influence, ambition, or world-view.

It might be helpful to look at this idea of **world-view** for a minute:

2) FOR FAITH TO MOVE FORWARD, IT MUST BE THE WORLD-VIEW YOU FUNCTION WITH EVERY MOMENT OF EVERY DAY

Perhaps this helps put a fresh explanation on what a growing, forward moving faith is all about. Every person has some dominant world-view - some **framework** through which he interprets and processes the raw events of his life. Like green sun-glasses make everything you look at appear green, our world-view is the way we **see** our world around us. It's what gives our circumstances **meaning**. Our world-view is how we **establish our priorities**, how we **use our time**, how we **spend our money**, how we **train our children**.

Your faith is the world-view you **function with day by day**. It's not the world-view you **profess** that counts, but the one you **use**. If you come to the place where the faith you **profess** is no longer what you **use** to set your goals and

make your choices your faith will soon feel totally irrelevant and meaningless.

This is when doubts begin to stalk your heart like jackals stalk a wounded calf. Because the **exercise** of faith has been long ignored, it's muscles are dormant. Your faith will no longer be strong enough to explain your circumstances and organize your choices. It will still sound nice in some religious, theoretical way. It will still look great in **church**. But it will seem increasingly like an **impractical way to function in the real world**.

James is right. When faith isn't used, the individual becomes **double-minded**. He's carrying around a belief system that seems as useful as a screen door on a submarine.

3) THIS IS WHY THE BIBLICAL IMAGES OF FAITH ARE ALL ACTIVE AND STRENUOUS

All the pictures of faith imply action and continuous application of effort and attention. Just a quick glance will bear this out:

- a) ***The life of faith is a runner stretching for a finish line - 1 Corinthians 9:24 - "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it."***
- b) ***The life of faith is a boxer preparing for a championship match - 1 Corinthians 9:26 - "So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air."***
- c) ***The life of faith is a wrestler engaging a foe on the mat - 1 Timothy 6:12 - "Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses."***
- d) ***The life of faith is a single-minded soldier preparing his gear for armed combat - 2 Timothy 2:3-4 - "Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. [4] No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him."***

Each of the above examples shines with a purposeful commitment to a single goal and vision. There is nothing **double-minded** in these pictures. In each case the person knows who he is and why he does what he is doing. These people interpret their lives around a very practical, dominant ambition. This is what **keeps faith sharp and in tune with life**. Because the runner is focused on the race, there is nothing irrelevant about the finish line. When you're running forward as hard as you can the finish line is all you think about.

4) WHAT CAN WE DO TO GUARD OUR FAITH FROM DOUBTS THAT COME FROM LACK OF GROWTH?

- a) ***Be very careful about faithfulness in little, mundane choices and duties*** - This is so important. These doubts are best resisted by remembering the way in which they approach. They don't come all at once. They come little by little, choice by choice, neglect by neglect. You are almost certainly losing more than you think when you skip devotions, stay home from church, and act against faith's best interest.

Hebrews 2:1 - "Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, **lest we drift away from it.**"

Drifting is the problem. As **Os Guinness** says, with these kinds of doubts, "**Faith is not torn up, it is merely frayed. It is not eaten away suddenly but nibbled at the corners.**" Only the careful will see it coming in advance. Only the wise will know their own frailty and never give this process a chance to start. The most common manifestation of this problem right now is the way Christians think they can stay relationally close to Jesus while drifting from frequent, regular church attendance.

- b) ***Instantly obey anything God tells you to do in His Word*** - Remember, when you **disobey** God at any one point, or when you **fail** to obey Him at any one point - you always lose more than just that one point. It's not like a wrong answer on an exam at school. You don't just move from an A- to a B+. In the spiritual realm small transgressions are far more serious than that. The whole fabric of your faith is compromised and weakened. You've set a downward spiral into motion. Your faith will seem increasingly irrelevant as you develop the habit of not heeding and using it faithfully.

And you won't long hold intellectually to a faith you don't consistently demonstrate with your actions. This is a principle with deep Scriptural roots:

Romans 8:16 - "The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God...."

This verse describes the ***partnership involved in the process of establishing assurance of heart and mind***. The Holy Spirit testifies ***with*** our spirit. But He never testifies ***against*** our spirit. If our inner self - our own human spirit - acts and feels like a fraud the whole process of assurance (which is the opposite of doubt) is short-circuited.

Never believe the lie that a small compromise of faith today is not important to your soul. ***Faith must mean everything today or it will mean nothing tomorrow***.

The only safe place for faith to rest is in heaven. Until then it's just like riding a bike. The only way to keep from falling over is to keep moving forward.