

Why I'm a Christian

Week 4: Doubting Our Doubts

Grab a Bible and flip to Romans 1 where we started this series 3 weeks ago.

For the last three weeks we've been working to show that there's more substance -- there's more going on underneath Christian belief than you might have realized.

We wanted to end the teaching content of this series by looking at the reality that there's also more going on underneath the surface of our doubt that you might have realized.

Romans 1:16

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. 17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith." 18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. 19 For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. 20 For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.

This is a particularly heady, logical section of scripture where Paul introduces the foundation for complex philosophical arguments like the cosmological and teleological arguments ... and yet, he starts with the statement, *"I am not ashamed of the gospel."* It's interesting because shame isn't a raw, rational matter of facts. Shame is highly emotional and social. A few verses later in v. 18, Paul says all people are guilty of *"suppressing the truth ... by our unrighteousness."* Paul is telling us there's more going on underneath faith and doubt than just raw philosophical rationality.

Here's why this is so important: Our culture is uniquely helpful at churning doubt. Which means you're going to need to know how to deal with doubt if you're going to live here.

Like Adam talked about in week 1, as modern Westerners we are prone to thinking that we should live by "exclusive rationality". We should only believe what can be proven. And while the truth is nobody actually believes anything based on pure rationality and proof, the idea that we should perpetuates the power doubt has in our lives... Sure that might seem like the most reasonable conclusion... but can I prove it 100%?

As well, our culture has a predisposition toward deconstruction. Deconstructing traditional ways of thinking is en vogue. That's not all bad: plenty of broken traditional ways of thinking need to be deconstructed... But we've adopted an air of deconstruction where socially speaking - critique and doubt are celebrated. So any of us who like to be celebrated have subtle, cultural motives encouraging us toward doubt.

Ok I've got three points about doubt, that we need to survive doubt in a culture that celebrates it:

1.) Doubts are full of hidden beliefs.

Michael Polanyi, Hungarian-British polymath - which means he's an academic scholar in a wide variety of fields - or he's smarter than you in many fields than you'll ever be in one... he wrote a book called

Personal Knowledge including a chapter called “The Critique of Doubt”.

He argues: “Doubt always contains an element of belief. Doubt and belief are ultimately equivalent... The doubting of any explicit statement denies [one] belief ... in favor of other beliefs which are not doubted for the time being.”

Let me give you an example:

One of the larger times of doubt in my life came in college when I found out my dad was having an affair that led to my family falling apart. In the midst of my pain, I started to ask, “God if you’re good... and you’re strong enough to stop this... Why aren’t you?”

At a larger philosophical level, this doubt is, “If God is all good, all loving and all powerful, then why does evil exist?” It’s a powerful question in the midst of horrible examples like 6 year old Faye Swetlik from Cayce. For many atheists, this isn’t just a doubt, but a proof of atheism. What kind of God would let pain and suffering like this exist?

We’ve done entire series tackling these questions, and if you’re hurting please let us know, we’d love to minister to you in the midst of it. But this doubt is full of hidden beliefs.

So as I wrestled with the pain of my family, I started to realize what I was really saying was “All-knowing God couldn’t have a reason for allowing this suffering to happen that I couldn’t understand.” Uh-oh. Of course all-knowing God could have reasons beyond my comprehension.

As I dug deeper, I realized another hidden assumption was that God hasn’t done, isn’t doing and isn’t going to do anything about evil in the world. But that doesn’t describe God of the bible at all. God hates evil, is working to restrain it by common grace, has entered into it and someday will do away with all of it. I really struggled with blaming God for my pain, until I realized I was actually standing with Him in hating it.

The point is, all of our doubts are full of hidden beliefs that we can and need to scrutinize.

Let me give you some steps for how to do this:

Step 1: Expect doubt will come. If you don’t expect doubt to come, it’ll be a great deal more troubling when it does. And Biblically, this is foolish. I love verses like **Jude 22 - “Be merciful to those who doubt.”** And 2 Timothy 2:13 that says **“when we are faithless - God remains faithful.”** God isn’t surprised when we struggle with doubt, and we shouldn’t be either.

Step 2: Is this the fog or acute doubt? Sometimes we wrestle with very specific questions. Other times, it’s just a kind of fog - “it’s nothing specific... it’s just kind of everything.” We deal with the fog with prayer. We deal with acute doubts with prayer... and step 3 and 4.

Step 3: Write them down. If it’s acute, write it down. Doubts love to hover in what I might call the gray swirl of half-thoughts and confusion. To deal with a doubt, you’ve got to get it out of the gray swirl of thoughts and write it down on paper where you can look at it.

Step 4: Look for the hidden beliefs. Ask yourself, what beliefs are hidden in this doubt. Include your LG, do some reading. Ask a pastor. And once you find the hidden beliefs, scrutinize them just as firmly as the doubt was making you scrutinize your initial belief.

Step 5: Continue to practice following Jesus. In teaching team this week, someone asked, “Name one person we know who walked away from Jesus but was faithfully walking in the practices of prayer, meditating on God’s Word, community, confession or encouragement?” Now I’m not saying that person doesn’t exist, but no one came to our minds. Adam then said, “You know, you become prayerless way before you become faithless”....

(optional) - And let me say this real quickly. May only matter to a handful in the room, but if you’re filling your ears and your mind with Doubt propaganda - friends or podcasts that are non-stopping mocking and shaming your belief in Jesus... what are you doing? You already live in a culture that churns doubt non-stop. You can’t feed it.

First reality, doubts are full of hidden beliefs. We need to doubt our doubts. Next two are unpack more why this is so important.

2.) Doubts are socially formed. In every culture, certain things are normalized and we're socialized into them unbeknownst to us. This is what I mean...

Some of our pastors were visiting Charlotte with Tim - getting ready to plant a church there. And they went to a particularly hip part of town called Noda to this quirky little coffee place called Smelly Cat Cafe... and they looked around at a group of people who all claimed to value self-expression and individual freedom as the highest good... One of them was writing a novel on the topic... And they were all dressed the exact same. They All had the same scarf. Same jeans. Same hipster used boots. “Why does everyone’s self-expression look the same?”

We all do this in some silly ways that don’t matter that much. But this socialization is also happening to us at deeper levels. I read a fascinating article recently unpacking research about the power of social networks. Here were some of their startling conclusions: “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 person.”

The same principle held true for losing weight, smoking habits, back pain, depression and general rates of happiness. You are being socialized by people you’ve never met in ways that are almost impossible to see. And this is happening with our doubts as well:

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.”

In America, our doubts tend to move toward a very common set of beliefs:

- “Belief in God is optional in order to have a full life of meaning, hope and satisfaction.”
- “As long as you don’t harm others, you should be free to live as you see fit.”
- “The only way to become yourself is to discover your deepest desires and dreams.”
- “Belief in God isn’t necessary for moral values and human rights.”
- “There’s little to no evidence for the existence of God and the truth of Christianity.”

Almost everyone in our culture who wrestles with doubt or walks away from Jesus comes to some version of these conclusions. We all end up being the NoDa guy at Smelly Cat Cafe. We’re all wearing the same doubt scarf thinking raw, logical rationality got us there.

Sometimes it’s helpful to see these socially formed doubts in other cultures different than ours.

For Paul in his Roman culture, there was a deeply held belief that if society used its resources on poor people, the society could not sustain. They believed helping the poor would ruin civilization. Many people rejected Christianity for that reason alone. For the vast majority of Americans that wouldn't be a reason to reject Jesus. We might disagree about how to help... but few would say "we can't or shouldn't."

In any and every culture the gospel goes into there are some defeater beliefs that cause doubt and skepticism. This kind of goes without saying, but the only reason for Paul to mention in v. 16 that he is not ashamed of the gospel is that there is some socializing pressure on him to feel shame about the gospel. So this is part of why God calls to deal with all of life including our doubts together in community. God is forming us into a counter culture where following Jesus is the norm we are all fighting for together. (shameless plug: followingJesustogether.com)

So as we scrutinize our doubts we need to watch for how our socialized norms are putting subconscious pressure on us. We also need to watch out for our own personal pressure:

3.) Doubts are not neutral.

We talked about this in more depth in week 1 but Paul's insight in **Romans 1:18** that *"We suppress the truth in our unrighteousness."* is rich in helping us examine our doubts.

So think back to the beliefs that most modern, western doubts move toward. Did you notice how the pattern is, "I get to be in charge of my whole life and no one gets to tell me what to do"? Think about that for a second. Do you mean to tell me that pure, rational, logical examination of the universe led all of us to believe we should all be our own gods and no one gets to confront us or tell us we're wrong ever? Consider me skeptical.

What if Paul is right and we're suppressing the truth in the name of rational doubt because we sinfully want what we want and we don't want anyone to be able to tell us no.

The Bible is right. We aren't neutral. We aren't unbiased. And neither are our doubts.

Aldous Huxley - commenting later in life on his earlier rejection of Christian meaning in the universe - "For myself, as, no doubt, for most of my contemporaries, the philosophy of meaninglessness was essentially an instrument of liberation. The liberation we desired was simultaneously liberation from a certain political and economic system and liberation from a certain system of morality. We objected to the morality because it interfered with our sexual freedom; we objected to the political and economic system because it was unjust."

Do you hear what he's saying? He had a reason to adopt a skeptical position of doubt. It meant he was free to live as he saw fit. Huxley is being honest that he was not neutral in his doubting. And none of us are. We are biased by our desires, our hurts, our experiences. None of us are disconnected or neutral. And this can lead to disastrous effect:

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 witnessed.

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 body in the town to dig graves for each body.

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

That is a truly haunting thought. 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 suppress the truth." We know but we don't want to know.

It's actually worse than we aren't neutral. We aren't just passively and unknowingly biased, we are subconsciously working to suppress the truth. We aren't even trustworthy. From the garden until now all humanity has been tempted to believe that we are better off on our own, as our own authority, without God.

It hurts me to think about how untrustworthy I've been throughout my life. Do you know how many times I've convinced myself or others that tomorrow I'm going to start becoming a slim, toned, vegetable-loving health nut... always tomorrow.

You know, I can still remember the shock in my dad's face when he realized my sisters and I weren't going to side with him in the divorce. And that we wanted him to own his responsibility. He had completely convinced himself that his actions were justifiable. He had suppressed the truth and deceived himself. And the truth is all we do this.

The truth is no one has caused me more pain in my life than I have. No one has limited my potential or prohibited my growth as much as I have. No one has deceived me more than me. And yet I go on trusting myself day after day.

One of the most concrete ways I see this is in my marriage. If my marriage was based on pure, raw logic, my wife has so many reasons to doubt me... to distrust me... to be bitter towards me. My only hope is that my wife's love and our marriage is built on grace.

And the truth is that's the same reality for my Christian faith.

At the end of the day, I'm not a Christian because of raw, logical evidence, though I find much of it to be very compelling. I am a Christian because doubt cannot convince me that I'm not sinful to the core. And doubt can't convince me I'm not desperately in need of God's grace.

At the end of the day I'm a Christian because

Ephesians 1:3-5

"God chose [me] in [Jesus] before the foundation of the world... In love 5 He predestined [me] for adoption to himself as [a] son through Jesus Christ..."

Colossians 1:13-14 -

"[God] delivered [me] from the domain of darkness and transferred [me] to the kingdom of his beloved

Son, 14 in whom [I] have redemption and the forgiveness of [my] sins.”

Romans 5:5-8

For while [I was] still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly - ME - 7 ... God [showed] his love for [me] in that while [I was] still [a sinner], Christ died for [me]... and God's love has been poured into [my] heart through the Holy Spirit who has been given to [me].

In the midst of my untrustworthiness, and my doubt, God reached in and saved me. God showed me my sinfulness and all the ways I reject Him. The ways I worship other people's approval and live out of a shame-filled, religious desire to please people.

And instead of rejecting me, He saved me. He loves me. He sent Jesus for me. At the end of the day, I'm a Christian because God sent His Son to die in my place to pay for my sin, my untrustworthiness, to take His wrath towards my unrighteousness. And Jesus sent His Spirit to show me His love and teach me and seal me in Him. I don't know where you're at, but there is no bait and switch here. That's what we want for everyone of us in the room.

No matter how doubt tempts me to believe that I'm fine on my own and don't need God or can't trust God... the truth is those are the most suspect doubts of all.

At the end of the day, I am not the raw, logical, trusted one smart enough to put God on trial. God is the trustworthy one and I'm the one on trial. And like in my marriage, grace is my only hope.