

Faith and Doubt

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church
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James 1:1-8, Jude 17-25

So, let's review what James just said to us: "Ask God, and he will give you wisdom. And when you ask you must believe and not doubt, because the doubter is like a wave of the ocean, blown about by whatever wind happens to be blowing. A person who doubts like that should not expect to receive anything from God. Do not doubt! And if you doubt, you should not expect to receive anything from God."

That's a hard word! It's hard because I'm going to go out on a limb here and say that we've all doubted sometime in our life. All of us, at one time or another, have found ourselves standing alone in doubt's cold, empty room; shouting our questions, hearing them echo back at us, unanswered. It's not an easy room to be in, but we've all been there.

Frankly it's hard to avoid doubt these days. Doubt is sort of the condition of our age. As Philosophers Charles Taylor and Jamie Smith have noted, we live in an age where all belief is contested. We live in an age where we don't just hear the gospel proclaimed, we hear every objection to the gospel proclaimed. Not only do we know what the Apostles' Creed says, we know all the things the atheists and agnostics and materialists say to oppose that creed. This applies to all beliefs. In this hyper-connected, information saturated world, as soon as you stand up and say, "This is what I believe!" there are ten people who will stand up and tell you, "This is why you are wrong!"

Every truth claim has a denier. You claim something as a fact, and someone will be there yelling an alternative fact. In 2006 Scripps Howard conducted a poll and 16% of the respondents said it was likely that some explosives had secretly been planted in the World Trade center on 9-11 and that's what caused them to fall. Is anyone certain about anything anymore? In the words of Jamie Smith, "Faith is fraught and confession is haunted by an inescapable sense of its contestability. We are all Thomas now."

And yet James says, "When you ask, you should not doubt, because a person who doubts is like a wave of the ocean, such a person should not expect anything from God!!!" How can we POSSIBLY meet this standard in our doubt-saturated world?

Let's talk about doubt tonight. And faith. Let's think about what they are. Let's think about what they are not. At the center of this discussion we will take a close look at what the Holy Spirit is actually saying through the words of James, but before we get there let me make some general observations about doubt.

Let's admit that not all doubt is bad. Doubt can be good. Doubt has its uses. In a fallen world you can't be completely credulous; you have to have some level of doubt. You need some level of skepticism in order to survive. You see a TV preacher and he tells you that if you send his

ministry a thousand dollars the Lord will heal your disease and get you out of debt. You need doubt in that moment. You need skepticism.

At some point a whole group of Christians who had been told their whole life that slavery was fine and the African races were inferior began to doubt this received teaching. Blessed be that doubt. Jesus used doubt. The Devil came to Jesus and told him that if he worshiped him, all the kingdoms of the world would be his. Jesus doubted it. That doubt was sanctified!

I can think of at least one time where Jesus purposely sowed seeds of doubt in an over-confident disciple. In Matthew 8 a man comes up to Jesus and says, "Teacher I will follow you wherever you go!" Full of bravado, full of certainty. And what does Jesus say? "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of man has no place to rest his head." Jesus sows doubt in the man's mind. Jesus uses doubt as a tool to test the man's sincerity.

When you think about it, the central Christian virtue of humility requires some doubt. Humility is made of many things and one of those things is a little self-doubt; an understanding that you are broken and weak, so you shouldn't bulldoze others with your opinions and ideas. You might be wrong. So be quiet and listen. Not all doubt is bad. Doubt has its uses.

OK, but what about our passage!? "You must believe and not doubt!" Doesn't that call us to absolute confidence?! Doesn't that call us to certainty?! Doesn't James call us to banish all our doubt? Well let's look at this closely. The Greek word for doubt in this passage is *Diakrino*. It's made up of two words: *Krino*, which means to judge or to divide, and *dia*, a preposition which means through. So it literally means to judge or divide through. The image suggested by the word is someone with a divided mind. The image suggests someone who has trouble making up her mind. Someone caught between two opinions. Someone who waffles, someone who vacillates, someone who is caught up in a spin cycle of discernment and can't make a choice.

You see, there are two different kinds of doubt. There's doubt in the realm of the mind. If we are speaking about doubt in that realm a person who has no doubts holds a belief in his mind without ever having any counter question come against it. He is 110% sure of what he believes and the cloud of a question never obscures the sun of his certainty. In this example, doubt is a quality of mind, but we can also talk about doubt as a quality of the will. Doubt as something that prevents us from acting, doubt as something that prevents us from choosing and acting.

The classic picture of this kind of doubt is Hamlet. He's supposed to take revenge upon his murderous uncle, but he keeps waffling and as a result tragedy ensues. This kind of doubt is not about having perfect intellectual confidence all the time, this kind of doubt is about a failure to make a choice and a failure to act on that choice. It's not a failure of mind; it's a failure of nerve.

It's this doubt of the will that James is talking about in our passage. James is NOT saying, if you want God to answer your prayer, you have to have perfect intellectual confidence. He's not saying that you must have to perfect certainty or God will reject your requests. James is saying, if you pray for wisdom, God will give it to you, and when he gives it to you, you better act on that wisdom. Don't hem and haw. Don't waffle. Pray, talk to fellow Christians, make a decision and then act on that decision.

How do we know that James is thinking about doubt in the will and not doubt in the mind? Well, look at the context. First of all, James is talking about perseverance during trials. Perseverance is a virtue of the will. When you persevere you *will* yourself to keep going in the face of trouble. Perseverance is not a virtue for people with intellectual certainty; in fact it's a virtue for people who aren't completely sure, but who keep going despite uncertainties. Second, think about how James thinks about faith.

What is James' famous saying about faith? James 2:17, "Faith, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead." James is not particularly interested in a kind of certainty that stays only in our mind; the kind of faith that impresses him is faith that *acts*. Faith that acts for God, acts for justice, acts for righteousness, acts for truth regardless of obstacles and uncertainties. It's not intellectual uncertainty that concerns James, it's our weak and waffling wills.

Martin Luther writes about an encounter he had with a German peasant woman who came to him distressed about her doubt. "Ah dear Doctor," she said to Luther, "I have the idea that I am lost and can't be saved because I cannot believe!" She thought that real Christians should never have intellectual doubts. Luther asked her, "Do you believe the Apostles' Creed?" "Oh yes, I do believe the creed is true."

"Then go in God's name!" said Luther, "For you believe better than I!" Luther comments on the encounter by saying, "It is the devil who puts such ideas into people's heads and says, 'Ah you must believe better. You must believe more! Your faith is not very strong and is insufficient. In this way he drives them to despair.'"

Luther was a man of great faith, yet he admits that he has intellectual uncertainties. Even his belief in the Apostles' Creed was sometimes clouded by intellectual questions. What Luther had learned and what he tries to teach this woman is simply this: Fallen people can't keep doubts from floating through their mind. Faith means ACTING in the face of these doubts. Faith means pushing forward when the clouds roll in. Faith means pushing forward down God's path not only on the clear days where the sky is blue and the view is clear; it means pushing forward on the days when the fog is thick and there's a chill in the air.

Luther is right. He and James are on the same page. Don't worry so much about your intellectual doubts. It's the doubts of the will that should concern you. This is a basic life skill. You cannot live as a successful human in this world if you don't learn to make all-in commitments in the face of intellectual doubts.

John Ortberg makes this point with respect to marriage. "Let's say before I got married I think, 'I'm human. I have no guarantees here, but I know I want to marry this person. I'm 95% certain. I have a very low doubt level, but the doubts are still there.'" I may feel that way, but when I get up at my marriage ceremony and make my vows I can't say "Nancy, I'm going to give you a good solid 95% commitment in our marriage. I will be 95% faithful to you as we walk through life together." You can't make it through life without making all-in commitments in the face of intellectual doubts.

Most of you know that a few years after she died, large portions of Mother Theresa's private writings emerged. These writings revealed that for long periods of her life she felt distant from God, she couldn't hear God's voice. She wrote, "Where is my faith? Even deep down... there is nothing but emptiness & darkness. So many unanswered questions live within me, I am afraid to uncover them."

Many unbelievers pointed to this writing as proof that Mother Teresa was a fraud. She wasn't the great hero of faith that everyone said she was! I disagree. By James' standard of faith, these writings only make her faith seem deeper to me. Because when she was facing trials of many kinds, when her intellect was beset by questions, she didn't give up, she persevered. Doubt afflicted her *mind* but not her *will*. She kept walking the path of faith through the fog, through the darkness, and now she is in the light.

There is one last thing to say. James urges us to keep going in the face of our intellectual questions. But what if we fall down? What if all the questions and fears overwhelm us? What if we have a sort of Spiritual anxiety attack and we just freeze? We can't go any further. Jude has a word for those times, "Be merciful to those who doubt." He says. Be merciful to all the doubters, including yourself. And Jude says more. Jude suggests that even when your mind and your will falter, there is still hope. Because when your mind and will fail, there is One whose mind and will shall never fail. Where does Jude say that? In the beautiful blessing that ends his letter, a blessing made for all those worn out from doubt and worry and who feel like they can't take another step.

Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and present you before his glorious presence, without fault, and with great joy, to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore, Amen.

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