

Dealing with Doubt
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Today we are going to be starting into our summer sermon series. We're calling it the Defender Series, and just as a reminder or in case you weren't here about a month-and-a-half...two months ago as we gave the prelude, we call it the Defender series basically because we're seeking to defend the faith. But when we defend the faith it is not something that is a combative, argumentative defense. It's something where, in actuality, we need to have the mindset that we are defending the person to whom we are speaking; we are defending them from the wrong thinking and the lies and the misunderstandings and misstatements and everything else that they are held subject to by the schemes of Satan. That is what we are defending. We are not defending ourselves, and we are not even defending God because honestly, God doesn't need anyone to defend Him.

And so what we're going to look at here today is the first sermon in this sermon series. And it's a sermon on doubt. It's basically looking at the question or the issue—do good Christians ever doubt or question their faith? Short answer...yes, good Christians do doubt and question their faith at times. That's part of being human. But we'll get into this here. And what we're going to do is we're going to start off by reading a passage, and this is going to be a little bit of a different sermon because we'll go through this passage, but we're going to look at other passages in scripture throughout this sermon over the next twenty-thirty minutes or so. But in Matthew 14:22-33 it says this:

Immediately He [speaking about Jesus] made the disciples get into the boat and go before Him to the other side, while He dismissed the crowds. And after He had dismissed the crowds, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray. When evening came He was there alone, but the boat by this time was a long way from the land, beaten by the waves, for the wind was against them. And in the fourth watch of the night He came to them, walking on the sea. But when the disciples saw Him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, "It is a ghost!" and they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid."

And Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water." And He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus. But when he saw the wind he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately reached out His hand and took hold of him, saying to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped Him, saying, "Truly You are the Son of God."

Now, go ahead and keep your finger here. We're going to...we're going to come back to this passage near the tail end of this sermon, ok? But first of all, what we're going to do is we are going to look at doubt and what is doubt, how does it work, why do we have it, why do we experience it. And then we're going to come back and look here in this passage—how do we conquer doubt? How do we react to doubt? What do we do about it? And that's what we're going to do here in the next little bit of time.

But first we need to look at: What is doubt? First of all, doubt is not the opposite of faith. Doubt is not the opposite of faith; unbelief is the opposite of faith. Faith is when you are single-minded about believing that something is true. Unbelief is when you are single-minded and convinced that it is not true. Doubt is when you are caught in a tug-of-war between the two. Ok? It's doubt when you are wavering back and forth between faith and unbelief. So doubt is not the opposite of faith. If you ever doubt or question, that does not mean you've lost your faith. It just means that you've come up against something in life that has caused you to reevaluate how you see the world and how you see God. So, first of all, doubt is not the opposite of faith.

Second of all James, in James 1...he describes doubt as being in two minds at one time, at the same time. How does this work? Well, he describes the doubter as someone who "...is like a wave of the sea, tossed to and fro by the wind," and someone who is double-minded in all his ways, and unstable. He doesn't mean this as an insult. It's just simply a statement of reality. It's someone...if you are a doubter, you are someone who...your mind is pulled this way and is holding onto faith here, but also it is struggling with unbelief over here, and you are caught in between. And so your mind isn't able to kind of hold onto both, and there's a tug-of-war going on, and so you're pulled back and forth like a wave on the sea.

And so is it ok for Christians to doubt or to question? What I would say it this: doubt is serious, because what it means is you've come up against something that is a challenge to your faith that you don't have the answers for. And all of a sudden there is a war going on inside of your soul, and inside of your mind, for whether or not you will continue to have faith. And so it is a serious thing. It's something that we need to tackle head-on. But at the same time, it's a normal part of being a finite, fallen, human being. You see, because we are limited we don't see all the pictures of the puzzle. We don't see how everything fits together. We can't see all of reality; we can't understand every single thing there is to understand about God. If we could, we would *be* God; but we can't. And so, naturally, what ends up happening as our lives are lived...we end up running into things that just don't seem to quite fit together. And so our mind says, 'Ok, I see this and I believe this, but I see this over here,' and they don't seem to fit, and this tug-of-war starts happening. It's a simple matter of being a finite, fallen, human being, because we don't understand it all, and so our minds are trying to make it cohesive so that we will be single-minded, so that we will have integrity, that our mind will be integrated and single-minded about what we believe and what we live.

So this is something that we need to take seriously, ok? But it is something that is a normal thing for Christians to experience. I think that's part of the reason why, out of six hundred and eleven (611) surveys that we received about a month-and-a-half ago when we did the survey in the services, two hundred and seventy-six (276) of you responded that this is something that needs to be addressed, whether it's because you, personally, struggle with doubt, or you know someone who struggles with doubt or questions faith, and is it ok for someone...for good Christians...to question their faith? Two hundred and seventy-six of you said yes, this is something that we need to know about; which shows that this is a common, common thing for people to wrestle with.

So we'll go on and we'll look at this. Why do we doubt? There are three basic reasons that I would kind of categorize, and there's different categories, and different things here within these. But there's three basic foundations that I would say that end up being the root cause of our doubt. First is that we lack true understanding; second, that we lack true commitment; and third, that we lack true obedience. Now, every single doubt that we have does not trace its roots back to *each* one of these. But I guarantee that any doubt that you do have traces its root and its foundation back to *at least one* of these. At least one of these things is true in an area in which you doubt.

What do I mean? Well, let's look at each of these. First of all, we lack true understanding. How do we lack true understanding? Typically—and this is all approached from the Christian faith perspective—typically we idealize ourselves, and/or we have a faulty view of God and His character. We idealize ourselves. How do we do that? Well Paul, in Romans 1:18, he says that people, us, as sinners...we suppress the truth. We know God, we know the truth of God and who He is, but we suppress it. And instead, what we do is, even though we know the truth, we don't honor God as God, and we fail to give Him thanks. Well what does that have to do with idealizing Him? Doubt. It's simply this—I like to think better of myself than reality warrants. I like to think of myself as a pretty good person. And so what happens is that's not the case, and what I like to think up here does not match reality. So what happens is this: if I could tear my chest open and you could see my heart, so to speak, my soul, my spirit, what you would see would actually be a very wretched, dark, wicked thing. Because you don't see the pride, or the anger, the impatience, the lust, the greed, everything else that I struggle with. If you could, you would say, 'Ashley is probably one of the most wicked people I know.' But here's the thing—that's true of all of our hearts. Really, we're wicked sinners...we're wicked sinners. And we forget that. And so what happens is we begin to idealize ourselves. And as we idealize ourselves, we feel like we deserve more than we actually do. See, all we deserve is death; the death that Jesus died on the cross—that is what I deserve, no more. And so I start to get a sense of ingratitude, and I take it for granted, all the undeserved blessings that I get, and I forget to thank God for them. Not only do I forget to thank God, but I start to feel robbed when He doesn't give me more, because I feel like I deserve it. And so I forget about it, and I forget that, really, God has been better to me than I deserve. And I suppress the truth of my own evil, sinful nature, and I turn my back on God, and I lose my gratitude to Him.

Paul goes on, and he explains that not only that, but people...we turn around and we exchange the glory of the true God who exists, this immortal God, and we exchange it for images, for man-made ideas of who God is, that resemble ourselves, or some other bits of creation. We make God into what we want Him to be. What's the most typical way that I've run into this here in America? It's the idea of "God wants me to be happy." I don't see that anywhere in scripture. God wants me to glorify Him; of course, He knows that in glorifying Him I am meeting my purpose for creation, and that will bring me more joy than anything else. But joy and happiness are not the same thing. Glorifying God and my happiness are not the same thing. And so what happens is I get it in my mind that I think I am better than I am, or if I get it in my mind that God just wants me to be happy, or whatever else it is that we want to make God be, what happens is I'm holding this idea up here, and all of a sudden the problems of life come and hit me. The storms of life come and hit me, and I am left questioning, 'Well, wait a second, God. Why don't I get this? I deserve it.' No I don't. The information that I have up here does not match reality, and it causes

doubt. "God, why am I not happy? Are You just not good? Do You just not care about me? Do You not just love me? I mean, what's going on? Are You even there? Do You exist? I'm not happy!" The problem is not that God is not there, that He is not good, or that He doesn't exist. The problem is that I have the wrong idea of God, His character, and what He wants for my life. And so one of two things will happen...I will either have to let go of that false view of God or the idealization of myself and hold onto the God who is real, as he is, or I will gradually lose grip on my faith and I'll swing more and more towards unbelief. That's the first way that we look at doubt, and that we lack true understanding, and it can cause doubt.

But then there's another reason, and we'll go through here. The second reason that we lack true understanding is because we don't know the 'why' of what we believe. We don't know why we believe what we do. Just as a quick quiz, if someone were to ask you 'Why do you believe in the Bible? Why do you believe it's true? Why do you think you can trust it?' what would you say? Can you tell someone reasonably, give them an explanation—as we're asked to do, so to speak, in 1 Peter 3:15 to give an explanation, a defense, a reason for the hope that is within us for our faith—could you explain to someone why you trust the Bible? Why do you believe that God created the entire universe? Why do you believe that God is good, in a world that is full of suffering? If we can't do this, then this is where another area of doubt can come in. And see, we have this idea, this belief, and we're holding onto it; and all of a sudden someone comes to us and they ask these questions, and they ask very good, honest questions that are difficult to answer. But we've never wrestled with it, and we've never thought through it, and so when they ask these sort of questions we realize that we don't have answers, and our faith is based on feeling, or on just 'that's what I was brought up to believe.' That's why this right here, I think, is probably the main reason why a large number of our students, I think...depending on who you talk to, it's anywhere from seventy to eighty percent of students...when they graduate from high school and when they...and this is across America, denominations, churches, everything else...when they leave their homes they leave their faith behind, because they get to the universities and their faith is battered, and they can't give an explanation for why they believe what they believe.

What happens is we encounter someone who has plenty of reasons for unbelief and we can't answer with any reasons *to* believe. And so that tug-of-war of doubt begins. And the answer here is really that we need to be digging into scripture; we need to read all that we can. If this is the sort of doubt that you have, if you are struggling with these sorts of doubts, we need to be digging in and finding the answers. There's no way to work through this doubt except for digging in and finding the truth in scripture and in plenty of other books. There have been plenty of books written about all kinds of things. Just about any question you can have of the faith, there's stuff written on it. And the thing you need to do is seek answers and not stop 'til you find 'em.

But we're gonna move on here. The second big foundation that often causes doubt, that doubt is built upon, is a lack of true commitment. You see, there is a difference between knowing *about* God and *knowing* God. Knowing about God is not the same thing as knowing God. There are a large number of people in our churches here in America today who fit into this category. Maybe they've grown up in church, maybe they've come to church here later in life, whatever it is, but it is very much an intellectual knowledge. It's not something that they have ever gone ahead and committed their life, their soul, their heart, their being, every ounce of themselves to. That's why Jesus, in Matthew 7:21-23...He ends up saying 'Listen, not everyone who says to me "Lord, Lord" is going to enter into the kingdom. In fact, there will be many people who come and stand before My throne, who will say, "But we did this in Your name, we did that. We did all kinds of mighty works in Your name."' And He'll say, 'You know what, though? I never knew you. We never had a relationship. Depart from Me.' You see, there is a simple reality here. It can be best illustrated, I think, by...if... Has anybody ever rappelled here? How many people have rappelled? Yeah, ok, we've got some people who've rappelled. Ok. There's...when you were rappelling you could really tell the difference between someone who actually trusts, and has confidence, and is really committed to that rope and its ability to hold you up. It's fine to stand back on the cliff and say, 'Ok, I believe that that rope...it can carry my weight. I have no doubts about it; I've seen it work for other people; I've seen it get other people safely to the ground, no malfunctions, no problems. I totally believe it.' There's a big difference between that and going ahead and stepping up to the ledge, latching yourself on, and leaning back with confidence. And oftentimes we approach the Christian life the same way. We say 'yes, I believe that Christ, His death, His resurrection, giving my life to Him...He can carry the weight of my soul.' But we have a hard time actually turning over control of our life to Him and trusting Him with it. And so we stand back and we make all kinds of intellectual agreements that 'Yes, it can,' but we stand back and we hold back. And as long as we are holding back, our mind is pulled in two different directions. Because we say, 'Yes, I know this,' but at the same time my mind knows that I am not living it, and I am not actually committed to what I am professing with my mouth.

A lot of times, if you're struggling with this sort of doubt, some of the ways that this may come out is maybe, probably the way it most is, is when you were confronted with someone else who has no problem goin' up there

and latchin' on to the rope, so to speak, and they just throw back, and they're goin' down the cliff. Spiritually speaking, this is someone who comes in, and you are intimidated and jealous of, and just have a problem with, and it threatens you how committed they are to Christ because it exposes the fact that you have never actually committed to Him. You've said a lot of words; you may believe a lot of things; but you have never actually given over your life to Him. And so the problem, if you struggle with those sort of doubts, actually is the sort of thing of what's in your head and comin' out of your mouth does not match your life. You need to go ahead and trust your life to Christ, turn over control of your life to Him, and make your life match your actions...or your words, I mean.

We'll go on. We lack true obedience. Now this is where...and we'll get into this in just a second...I think this is where Peter, when he got out of the boat and he started walking, this is where he failed. And this is the root cause of his doubt. And I'll explain why in just a minute. See, sometimes we doubt because we don't discipline ourselves to do what we know we should do. Sometimes...this is where Paul...he says, 'Listen,' in 1 Corinthians 9 he says, 'I discipline myself just as every athlete does. Every athlete disciplines themselves in all areas of life. In the same way I discipline myself. I make sure that my thoughts, my emotions, my actions are all under control. Because if I don't I will lose control and I will be disqualified from all the things that I have said, and my life will not match it and I will be disqualified.'

How does this play out? Well it's simply this. This is what I would call the "Yes, but..." syndrome. Ok? Yes, but... 'I know that this is the truth. I know I need to be reading my Bible and praying on a regular basis in order to grow, but...life is tough; it's difficult; I don't have time;' whatever excuse. 'I know that I should not be in this relationship, but...it makes me feel good.' 'I know that I should not place my trust in this to give me value and security, but...so on and so forth.' 'I know Christ can handle whatever comes, but...' It's the 'yes, but...' 'Yes, I know this, but I'm not willing...it costs too much to obey.' Or I don't feel like it, so I'm going to let my emotions, which are very strong, control me rather than controlling them. And I allow the fear or whatever else...the hurt, the grief, the anger, whatever it is...to come in and take control of my life contrary to what I know to be the truth. And so what happens is this tug-of-war once again begins. 'I know that this is true, but this is what I feel, or this is what I want to do.' And so we let go of this, and we hold onto the 'yes, but...' over here, whatever it is, and we let that...and the problem is that the longer that we hold onto whatever that 'yes, but...whatever' is, the longer we hold onto that, the harder it is to let go of it. And what happens is we are setting up a situation where our grip on our faith, in whatever area that we are contradicting, that grip is lessening in strength. We're letting go bit by bit by bit because we can't keep holding onto this if we are conscientiously, knowingly saying 'yes, I know that's true, but I want to hold onto this and I will not let go.' My grip is gonna start lettin' go. And we doubt.

This is what I think happened with Peter. Because you see, the scripture...it tells that...I mean, first of all, he wasn't lacking in understanding. He had no misconceptions about his ability to walk on water. He couldn't do it. I guarantee, never did it before that. You know, somethin', first time in the history of man, somebody walkin' on water sort of a thing. He had no problems about believing that Jesus could do it. And he knew why. He had seen Jesus perform all kinds of countless miracles; he saw Jesus walking on the water there; he knew that Jesus could allow him to walk on the water. He had full commitment. I tell you what—I would not have gotten out of the boat. I would have said, 'I'm hallucinating; there's somethin' goin' on.' I wouldn't have gotten out of the boat. I don't think I would have, if I was in that sea. But Peter...he did. He had full commitment. He said, 'Ok, I'll go ahead. I'll climb outta the boat.' And he started walking on the water. But then what happens? The passage says that "...when he saw the wind..." all of a sudden he had the waves slapping against his body, the spray hitting him in the face; the wind was whipping around and pulling at his clothes, his beard, his hair. He looks up...the sky is dark; and down beneath him the deep, dark abyss is just waiting to suck him down. And he takes his eyes off of Jesus. He allowed the storms to take his eyes off of Jesus. He said, 'Yes, I know all of this, but look around.' And he took his eyes off of Jesus and he started to sink. And he cried out, "Save me!" And Jesus reached down and saves him, and pulls him up and says, 'Why didn't you keep faith? Why did you doubt? Why did you let all this other stuff pull you and begin that tug-of-war between faith and unbelief?'

So what do we do about it? What do we do about doubt? Two things. First...and the first one is this—remember Christ's death and His resurrection. The more that I study doubt, the more that I study many of these questions that we have about the faith, the more and more I study this, especially the most difficult questions about the faith that we have, the more I am convinced that if we come back to this it will answer to our doubts. It will answer our questions. Why? Well, let's put it this way. For doubt...how can I remember my true nature and my past, my sin? By simply looking at the cross. When I see how brutally Christ was crucified, and He died more brutally than anything that I have ever witnessed—and I've seen some pretty messed-up, brutal things in other parts of the world, and He died more brutally than anything that I have seen—and that's what I deserve because of my sin, because of my rebellion, because I turn my back on God and I say, "No, I want to run my own life. Get out of here!" That's what I deserve. And so when I look at Christ's death I remember my true nature, and I remember to be

thankful. And so I don't expect, when I remember Christ's death, I don't expect to receive more than I really deserve and I'm thankful for all the undeserved grace that I do receive.

But then also it helps me remember who Christ really is. You see, He's the second person in the Trinity. He is God in the flesh. He came down, and this says volumes about God. He came down, He sent His Son, so that I could be saved, so that you could be saved, so that He would be glorified. He didn't have to! He was totally justified in allowing me to die that sort of death. Every breath that I get...but still, yet, His love was so great and His desire for us to know Him and glorify Him was so great that he was willing to sacrifice Himself, and to have Himself in the Trinity where God the Son, Jesus, was willing to die and go through that brutal of a death for someone who didn't deserve it. And God the Father, the first person of the Trinity, was willing to watch His own Son die. I cannot honestly say...I love you guys, but honestly there is no way that I would let my daughter or my son go through that for any of you; love you, but not gonna happen. God loved us so much that He was willing to do that. And so no matter what happens to me or the ones that I love, when I don't understand it I can look at it...and this is where the thinking why I believe what I believe...I am convinced of the reality of the death and the resurrection of Christ. And so there are times when I may not understand why, but I can trust that Jesus, that God, knows why and it's enough that I can trust Him. I don't know the 'why'; He does, and I can trust Him.

Then the second thing that I would say as far as doubt is this: there comes a point where we can know it, but we have to go ahead and get out of the boat, and we have to hold on with a single-minded focus to what we know to be true. We have to be focused on Jesus Christ and Him alone. And as the storms of life hit us, as these different things batter us, we have to stay focused on Christ and continue walking to Him, taking one step at a time, knowing full well that we don't have the capacity to make it through this life on our own, but He has the capacity to keep that deep, dark abyss from taking us down.

And so, here in just a moment we're going to close with a song that we've been singing the last several weeks, a song of prayer asking God to give us confidence as we seek to move forward and share our faith in Him. And so here... But before we do I simply want to call your attention to two things. First, there is a book...if you have questions about doubt...it's called "God in the Dark," "God in the Dark." We have some copies out here at our bookstore. Feel free to swing by, pick that up. It's a really good book on doubt and how we deal with it as Christians. Second...over here we have our five core commitments listed. The last two are these—that we would have authenticity in our spiritual life, and that we would have community in our congregational life. If you are struggling with doubt I would ask you to keep those two things in mind. Spiritual authenticity—you don't have to put on a façade and a false mask, acting as though you don't have questions or doubts, or you aren't struggling with some aspect of your faith. It's ok, it's a normal thing. It's serious, but it's normal. And here is where the fifth core commitment comes in—we don't walk through it alone. So I'll just challenge you. If you do have issues that you are wrestling with, go ahead and find someone here in the church. Find another fellow believer who can walk through it with you and process this with you. If you aren't quite sure who to talk to, after we sing this song feel free to come up front. You can talk to me; a couple of others will be down front here. We'd like to talk with you, pray with you, whatever. Feel free to call us—me, the other pastors—in the middle of the week; send us some email. We would love to talk with you, because you don't have to walk through it and find all the answers on your own. None of us do. And that's the way God designed it.

Let's stand.

[Congregation sings the prayer song.]

Thank you, and go in grace.