

## Introduction

1+1=2. How many of you believe that? It's all of us I'm sure. We all think and act as if 1+1=2. I saw a sign in a candy store that said "**Buy one; get one free.**" So, believing that 1+1=2, I took two packages of candy to the counter and the clerk charged me for one. But suppose I believe that 1+1=3. So I take three packages of candy to the counter and the clerk charges me for two. I protest that she's miscalculating, to which she replies that I need some serious help.

As absurd as that may seem, it is figuratively what many people do. They believe metaphorically that 1+1=3 and need to start believing that 1+1=2. Let's examine the narrative about Noah in Genesis 6:13-22 and what it teaches us about beliefs.

## What Belief Is

The first thing it teaches is what beliefs are.

I begin with the opening words of verse 13, "**Then God said to Noah.**" Those words imply that Noah had an ongoing conversational relationship with God. And in the course of that relationship, God informed him one day that the world was so wicked that He was going to destroy it. He then commanded Noah to build an ark and to stock it with animals according to the detailed instructions of verses 14-21.

It was an enormous project. For one thing, the ark itself was mammoth. Its volume, incredibly, was equal to that of 569 railroad stock cars. For another thing, somewhere between 16,000 and 40,000 animals had to be placed in it along with enough food to sustain them and the members of Noah's family. Even with God's supernatural help, it was a colossal task that probably took between 20 and 90 years to complete.

Anyway, that was God's calling and notice Noah's response in verse 22. He did "**according to all that God commanded him.**" Despite the depth of the sacrifice and work it required of him, he did it.

But why did he? The New Testament text we read, Hebrews 11:1-7

tells us. According to verse 7, it was **“by faith.”** Verse 6 in that text uses the word **“believe,”** and that’s what faith is. It’s belief and that’s the word I’m going to use today. Noah did all that God told him to do because he believed. He believed, according to verse 6, that God **“is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.”**

Now, verse 1 in that text defines what faith or belief is. It’s **“the assurance of things hoped for.”** It’s the confidence or conviction that something is real or true. All of us, for instance, are convinced that  $1+1=2$ . Or my mother was convinced that reading in dim light or sitting too close to the television set ruins our eyes. That illustrates what beliefs are. They’re things we’re confident or convinced are real or true.

### **What Beliefs Do**

Noah’s narrative not only teaches us what beliefs are. It also teaches us what they do. They direct our lives.

They certainly did Noah’s. He believed that God existed, that He was utterly good and great, and that He always did what He said. Had he not believed that, he would not have built the ark. Because he believed that, he did. What he believed determined what he did.

Beliefs are far more powerful than people generally realize. They direct the course of our personal lives and of history itself. As famed economist John Maynard Keynes declared, **“Indeed the world is ruled by little else.”** They dictate what people and even nations do.

Consider a widely held belief among couples that live together. Three, all of whom had Christian backgrounds, explained to me why they were doing so. It would increase their chances of having a successful marriage, they said. What they believed determined what they did.

You can see the nature of belief. It’s involves a readiness or tendency to act as if what is believed is so. Consequently, it directs the countless things we decide and do on a daily and even lifetime basis. It governs our lives for good or ill as profoundly as anything else does.

It only makes sense, therefore, that we take beliefs seriously. We

take them seriously by doing two things.

### **Base Beliefs on Knowledge**

First, we base our beliefs on knowledge.

I read about a pastor who asked a little boy what faith is. To which he quickly replied, **"It's believing what you know isn't true."**

What he said implies that people's beliefs aren't always based on knowledge. Knowledge isn't always their source. Sometimes, something else is. Emotions like fear, hatred, anger, or love, for instance, can give rise to beliefs. So, Jerry Sandusky's wife believes he's innocent because she loves him and fear the consequences if he isn't. Or people can **"catch"** beliefs from those whom they admire or respect. So, a teenage son believes that winning is the only thing because his dad does. My point is that people's beliefs are sometimes based on something other than knowledge.

And they're often false when they are. Let's go back to the belief that couples living together increases their chances of having a successful marriage. Studies by several highly regarded secular groups found the following: (1) Married couples who lived together are twice as likely to divorce as couples who didn't - 57% to 30%; (2) Couples who lived together are less satisfied and happy in marriage than couples who didn't; and (3) Non-virgin brides increase their chances of divorce by 60%. Those findings debunk that widely held belief among couples who live together. The moral of the story is this. Beliefs not based on knowledge are often false. Belief based on knowledge are usually true.

For our good and the good of others, therefore, let's base our beliefs on knowledge - beginning with this one, God is and is a rewarder of those who seek Him. A word in Hebrews 11:1 implies how we do that. The KJV translation of this verse is the correct one, **"Faith is . . . . the evidence of things not seen."** We base our beliefs on knowledge by gathering evidence. Gathering evidence means We collect as many relevant facts as we can by studying and observing. Once we've done

that, we then apply good logic to those facts and draw conclusions from them. Those conclusions comprise our beliefs.

Several Christian young people believe that using filthy language isn't morally wrong. They believe that because they lack knowledge. They've "**caught**" their belief from our current culture. In contrast, I believe it is morally wrong and my belief is based on knowledge.

First, I collected facts by studying. The Bible prohibits filthy language directly, in Colossians 3:8. Paul commands "**Put aside abusive speech.**" The Greek word translated "**abusive speech**" there connotes filthy language. The Bible also prohibits it indirectly in Matthew 5:22, which forbids contemptuous speech and Ephesians 4:29, which forbids "**unwholesome**" speech. I also collected facts by observing. Filthy language is an expression of contempt and is "**unwholesome,**" that is, degrading or lowering of individual and collective self-esteem.

Second, once I collected the facts, I then applied good logic to them. **Premise #1:** If God prohibits something, it's morally wrong. **Premise #2:** God prohibits filthy language. **Conclusion (belief):** Filthy language is morally wrong. Also – **Premise #1:** If God prohibits something, it's morally wrong. **Premise #2:** God prohibits contemptuous and unwholesome speech. **Premise #3:** Filthy language is always contemptuous or unwholesome. **Conclusion (belief):** Filthy language is morally wrong. That's my belief and it's based on knowledge.

Now, we need to base our beliefs on knowledge whenever we can and the Noah narrative illustrates why. He believed that a flood was going to destroy the world. That belief of his was based on knowledge – on what he knew about God and what God had told him. That knowledge made him willing and even committed to building the mammoth ark and stocking it with the thousands of the animals that he did.

That teaches a critical truth about beliefs. Beliefs that are based on knowledge have a very different bearing on our lives than ones that aren't. Knowledge strengthens beliefs and makes them more compelling and shareable as a result. Knowing what I believe about filthy language,

for instance, compels me not to use it. It also imbues me with the confidence to exhort others not to use it. Without the knowledge I have, I wouldn't be nearly as committed to doing either of those things.

That testimony of mine prompts a crucial question. Are the defining or impacting beliefs in your life based on knowledge? If they aren't, act so that they will be. That's the first thing we do to take beliefs seriously. We base them on knowledge whenever we can.

### **Focus on Beliefs**

There's a second thing we do. Focus on beliefs.

Most people don't. I'm talking about church leaders, parents, teachers, politicians, employers and a host of others. They don't focus on beliefs. They focus on behaviors instead. They attempt to manage people's actions by pleading, rewarding, or punishing - without changing their minds. A lot of us do that don't we? We spend a great deal of time and effort trying to get people to do or not do things without changing what they're convinced is so.

There's something we need to grasp in that regard and I quote Dallas Willard: **"We always live up to our beliefs – or down to them, as the case may be. Nothing else is possible. It is the nature of belief."** Or to say it another way, people almost always act according to what they truly believe. They rarely act contrary to what they truly believe. Their actions come from their beliefs.

Let's make no mistake about that. I know I did for years. I assumed that people always believe what they profess to believe. But I now know better. People often profess to believe things they don't believe either to fit in to a group or for the purpose of group solidarity. They may do that for so long in fact that even they don't grasp that they don't believe what they profess. Their actions, of course, will eventually show what they truly believe.

So, a teenager professes that pre-marital sex is wrong because of her Christian upbringing but is sexually active. Her pastor, parents, and

perhaps even she think that she is living contrary to what she believes, but she isn't. In actuality, she believes that pre-marital sex is okay and is living *up to* or actually, because it's false, *down to* her belief.

Or a Christian professes that the Bible is God's word that gives the best information about the most important matters in life but rarely engages it. His pastor and perhaps even he think he is living contrary to what he believes, but he isn't. In actuality, he believes that the Bible's information isn't all that realistic and relevant and is living *up to* or actually, because it's false, *down to* his belief.

People almost always live up or down to their beliefs. We should focus on beliefs, therefore, not behaviors. We manage their actions by changing their minds. We try to change what they're convinced is so.

Doing that is a process. We build a context for communication by loving them. We then tackle the issues that matter to them - doing justice to the doubts they have, and articulating clearly and creatively what we believe and why we believe it. We pray and ask for the Holy Spirit's supernatural help as we do. We ask Him to be with our mouths - to inhabit and empower the words we speak so that the hearers will believe them.

So, the sexually active teenager's parents discipline her. But they also communicate to her what they believe and why. They explain, for instance, that there's no such thing as "**casual sex.**" They then explain why, by referring to Paul's profound psychological insight in 1 Corinthians 6:15-16 and illustrating it. They attempt to manage her actions by changing her beliefs. They try to change what she's convinced is so.

## **Conclusion**

That then is how we take beliefs seriously. We base our beliefs on knowledge and we focus on beliefs not behaviors. Let me ask you a question in closing. Do you take beliefs seriously? If you don't, you're thinking and acting as if  $1+1=3$ . If you do, you're thinking and acting as if  $1+1=2$ . So be wise and take beliefs seriously.