

## Introduction

I'd like to begin with a sampling of actual children's bloopers, spoken in Sunday school classes: (1) In the Book Guinness, God got tired of creating the world and took the Sabbath off; (2) the Fifth Commandment is *humor* thy father and mother; (3) the Seventh Commandment is thou shalt not *admit* adultery; (4) Solomon had 300 wives and 700 porcupines; (5) the epistles were the wives of the apostles; (6) one of the opossums was St. Matthew, who was a taximan; (7) a Christian should have only one wife, which is called monotony; and (8) faith is believing something you know isn't true.

As Art Linkletter used to say it, kids say the darndest things. Some of the things they say, however, are quite revealing. That's the case with that last blooper, "**Faith is believing something you know isn't true.**" Reading between the lines, the child who said that had apparently learned something from observing adults. They sometimes have doubts about their beliefs and that's what I'm preaching back today.

Last week, I said that the opposite of belief isn't doubt. It's unbelief. The problem is that doubt can quickly become unbelief. When does it? Historian Alister McGrath tells us, "**When you let it.**" So, don't let it. Let's take positive action and deal with our doubts instead.

We deal with our doubts by doing four things, the first of which I explained last week. We get doubt itself in perspective. We do three more things, each of which I'm going to explain today

## Confess Our Doubts

Second, we confess our doubts. That's what John the Baptist did. The fact that he sent his disciples to ask Jesus, "**Are you the Messiah,**" clearly implies something. He first of all confessed his doubt about that to them. John the Baptist confessed his doubt and so should we.

Let me quickly say though that most of us don't and here's why. We have a natural tendency to be ashamed of what we are. We also fear

that others will despise and reject us if they know what we are. So, we spend our lives concealing ourselves from others - hiding what we truly think, feel, and do.

The tendency to do that is so strong that psychologists sometimes speak of the **"imposter's phenomenon."** **"Imposter's phenomenon"** refers to the universal sense that at some level, I'm faking it – that if others knew the truth about me, the jig would be up.

Please know that this exists in the Christian community, especially in the context of doubts. Our problem is what I explained last week. We think having doubts means we aren't Christians. We're ashamed, therefore, that we have them. We also fear that others will despise and reject us if they find out we have them. So we conceal them and keep them hidden deep inside.

Lee Strobel spoke about doubts at a conference. Afterwards, a woman approached him and said: **"I was so glad to hear you say that doubt is common, because I thought I was the only one who had them. I was afraid to admit I had questions. I didn't want everybody around here (her church) to think I was some kind of wimp."** That woman is representative of many Christians who make up our local churches. Many of us, like she did, are conning people. We present ourselves to others as possessing a confidence in some of our beliefs that we really don't possess.

That's problematic though and here's why. Keeping our doubts suppressed only gives them more and more power over us. It enables them to grow and become more and more dominating of our mental, emotional, and volitional processes. In the end, it's a basic principle of our psychological life. There is no healing in hiding. As Psalm 32:3 makes perfectly clear, there is only sickness instead.

But there is healing in disclosing. Research, for instance, indicates a definite connection between self-disclosure and physical health. People who confess their sins, flaws, or problems appropriately experience short and long term physical gains. It isn't just physical healing though. It's

spiritual and psychological healing as well. Dietrich Bonhoeffer explained it this way in his classic book about Christian fellowship, *Life Together*: **“A man who confesses his sins in the presence of a brother knows that he is no longer alone with himself. He experiences the presence of God in the reality of the other person.”**

That is as true of doubts as it is of sins. When we disclose our doubts to disciples and friends of Jesus, we know we’re no longer alone. More importantly, we experience the presence of God in the reality of those disciples and friends. That in turn weakens the power of our doubts over us. There’s healing in disclosing.

In a Bible study years ago, we began discussing the inspiration of the Bible. One man, I could tell, was troubled as we did and finally confessed what was bothering him, **“I’m not really convinced that God wrote the Bible.”** He went on to say that his brother-in-law, a skeptic, identified contradictions and mistakes in it, which shook his faith and nagged him for months. Others and I responded to that doubt of his, giving him the help he needed. A year later, he, now confident in God’s written word, reflected back and said, **“If I hadn’t shared my doubt that night, I wouldn’t be where I am today.”**

Maybe there’s a particular doubt you have about Jesus and His gospel. Confess it to disciples or friends of Jesus you can trust. It will weaken its power over you if you do.

### **Inform Our Beliefs**

We deal with our doubts by doing a third thing. We inform the beliefs about which we have them.

As I explained last week, John the Baptist had believed that Jesus was the Messiah. When he began to have doubt about that, he sent his disciples to Him to inquire about it. Notice how Jesus responded. He told those disciples to listen to the words He spoke and observe the deeds He did, knowing they would make His messianic nature clear. Do you grasp what He was doing here? He was informing John and them.

That response of His helps us identify the root or source of most doubts. Let me quickly say that some people's doubts are actually subtle defense mechanisms. They aren't actually hung up on an objection to Jesus or His gospel. They're just casting around for an excuse – any excuse – not to take Him or it seriously. They fabricate doubts so they won't have to do what He wants them to do. But apart from that, the root of most of the doubts of most Christians is found in our text. That Jesus responded to the doubt of John and his disciples by informing them implies it. It's lack of understanding.

Back in 1972, Stevie Wonder released a song title "Superstition." It addresses people believing superstitious things like walking under ladders, the number 13, and breaking mirrors. Anyway, he shares in it what is just a profound insight, "**When you believe what you don't understand, then you suffer.**" Here that again and don't ever forget it. When you believe what you don't understand, then you suffer.

That insight, in my view, explains most of the doubts of most Christians. They have them because they don't understand what they believe. Their beliefs aren't based on knowledge, in other words, which makes them vulnerable to faith weakening doubts.

I've ministered to many Christians during their final illnesses. The things some said and did indicated what they seemed to believe. It's that their life after death wasn't going to be as good as their life before it. They doubted that "**to die is gain,**" to quote Paul. As I talked with them and asked them questions about that, I realized what the problem was. They had no detailed understanding of life after death. They believed what they didn't understand and thus, suffered. That is, they doubted.

Lack of understanding is the basis of most doubts.

But there's a flip side to the coin. Understanding is the basis of strong beliefs. That means the best way to deal with our doubts is to understand our beliefs. And the only way to understand them is to inform them. We study and learn everything we can about the beliefs we doubt. We gather as much evidence as we can about them and follow it

where it leads. Doing that places our beliefs on a firm foundation and makes them unshakable. I speak from experience.

Last week, for instance, I mentioned my doubt about the reality of hell. How can finite human beings deserve infinite punishment in hell? I no longer have that doubt because I informed my belief. I studied Scripture and the writings of good masters and learned realities or truths that are relevant to it. As dreadful as it is, I learned that it isn't literal flames as I thought. I also learned that it isn't an **"oops or slip."** People don't just miss heaven by the skin of their teeth and go to hell. They go there because of the life-long development of their character. Their character makes it the suitable place for them to be. I also learned that hell is just. God respects the intrinsic value of the unsaved. What they choose in time, therefore, He gives them in eternity. I learned more but that's enough to make the point. Lacking understanding, I doubted. Having understanding, I don't doubt.

Maybe you have doubts today. Maybe you doubt that God is good or that prayer is effective or that to die is gain or that good overcomes evil, and so on. If you do, inform the beliefs about which you have doubts. Those doubts will be weakened and those beliefs strengthened if you do.

### **Take the Kingdom of God**

There's a fourth thing we do to deal with our doubts. It's found in verses 11-14 of our text.

Notice the term in verse 11, **"the kingdom of heaven."** It refers to the triune God and all the realities and powers of His invisible realm.

Now look at verse 13. Jesus states that **"all the prophets and the Law prophesied until John."** He's saying that John the Baptist and his ministry ended the Old Testament era.

That helps explain His astonishing statement in verse 11. No person who ever lived was greater than John the Baptist. But we who are apprentices of Jesus are greater than he was. The meaning is this. In the Old Testament era of John the Baptist, God's people accessed the

kingdom of heaven through the official practices of Jewish rituals and institutions, such as Levitical sacrifice in the temple. But now, through Jesus, **“the kingdom of heaven”** is **“at hand”** as He said it in Matthew 4:17. It’s directly accessible to all of us who apprentice ourselves to Him. It wasn’t to John the Baptist, but it is to us. And in that sense, we’re greater than he was.

So, as Jesus teaches us in verse 12, let’s **“take it by force.”** Let’s purposely and intensely engage it and interact with it. We do that in specific and practical ways, all of which I’ve explained in detail before: solitude and silence, fasting, study, worship, prayer, Bible meditation, Bible memorization, lectio divina, practicing the presence of God, purposeful obedience, service, and more. When we devote ourselves to these practices, we take the kingdom of heaven by force. We access it.

Remarkable things happen when we do. One of those is this. Our beliefs are strengthened. Belief is ultimately a gift of the Holy Spirit. Well, taking the kingdom of heaven by force allows the Holy Spirit to invade, inhabit, and work in our mental, emotional, volitional, and bodily processes. He does many mighty things there, two of which are building beliefs and destroying doubts.

Once again, I know this by experience. I’m never stronger in faith than when I’m faithfully accessing the kingdom of heaven. I’m never weaker in it than when I’m neglecting to do so. The best antidote to doubt I know is taking the kingdom of heaven by force.

## **Conclusion**

Listen to the words of the 17<sup>th</sup> century English philosopher Francis Bacon in closing: **“If a man will begin with certainties, he shall end in doubts; but if he will be content to begin with doubts, he shall end in certainties.”** He’s right. Take heart. The doubts we have now can become certainties. Get doubt in perspective, admit our doubts, inform our beliefs, and take the kingdom of heaven by force. Deal with our doubts, in other words. They’ll become certainties if we do.