



Breaking Free from Doubting Castle

Luke Series #21

Luke 7:18-35

David Sunday

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Our reading of God's Holy Word is from Luke 7:18-35. Remember the purpose of the Gospel of Luke is that we may know with certainty the things we have been taught about our Lord Jesus Christ. Luke is writing in particular to a man named Theophilus who has his doubts about Jesus. Luke wants Theophilus to know for sure that Jesus is Who He claims to be. He makes it clear that Theophilus is not alone in his doubt.

We're going to look at faith and doubt by posing four questions:

1. Who doubts?
2. Why do we doubt?
3. What should we do when we doubt?
4. When do our doubts become deadly?

Let's look at God's Holy Word beginning at Luke 7:18:

¹⁸ The disciples of John reported all these things to him. And John, ¹⁹ calling two of his disciples to him, sent them to the Lord, saying, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" ²⁰ And when the men had come to him, they said, "John the Baptist has sent us to you, saying, 'Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?'" ²¹ In that hour he healed many people of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many who were blind he bestowed sight. ²² And he answered them, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. ²³ And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."

²⁴ When John's messengers had gone, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? ²⁵ What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who are dressed in splendid clothing and live in luxury are in kings' courts. ²⁶ What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ²⁷ This is he of whom it is written,

"Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you."

²⁸ *I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.”²⁹ (When all the people heard this, and the tax collectors too, they declared God just, having been baptized with the baptism of John,³⁰ but the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him.)*

³¹ *“To what then shall I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like?³² They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another,*

*“‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;
we sang a dirge, and you did not weep.’*

³³ *For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, ‘He has a demon.’³⁴ The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, ‘Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’³⁵ Yet wisdom is justified by all her children.*

Let’s pray.

Father, I pray through the power of Your Spirit and working of Your Word You would create faith where it is absent, sustain faith where it is present and strengthen faith where it is weak. I pray Your Son Jesus Christ would be magnified through the faith of this congregation. We ask this in His name. Amen.

Who Doubts?

“Everyone doubts their faith to some degree. If they say they don’t, they are either lying, they don’t take their faith very seriously, or God has had incredible mercy on them.” That is what a Christian apologist named Michael Patton said and I suspect he is right. Who doubts? I suspect almost every Christian at some time has wrestled with doubt. In fact, if we were to take an anonymous poll of the secret thoughts of this congregation, I would suspect over 90 percent have—at some point over the last month—wrestled with some measure of doubt. I don’t say that every Christian doubts. However, most Christians who take their faith seriously have doubts at some time. Some Christians go through times of severe, prolonged doubt.

In his book Pilgrim’s Progress, John Bunyan tells the story of a young man named Christian and his friend, Hopeful, as they travel to the Heavenly City. They go through many dangers, toils and snares along the way. Their journey is abruptly halted when they come to a place called Doubting Castle owned by the Giant Despair. Giant Despair and his wife conspire to destroy the pilgrims before they reach the Celestial City. When Christian and Hopeful come into Doubting Castle, Giant Despair beats them mercilessly and after a while hands them a noose, a knife and a bottle of poison. He counsels them: “Your only way out of this place is by death. So why are you waiting? Make an end of yourselves! Why should you choose life, seeing it was attended by so much bitterness?” In their despair, Christian and Hopeful

turn to the Lord and Christian suddenly discovers he has a key in his pocket. The key is named Promise and with it he can unlock the gates of Doubting Castle and be set free.

Every Christian struggles with doubt. Thankfully, doubt is not always deadly but it is always serious. Doubt is not the absence of faith, rather it is an indication of the weakness of faith—a sign that our faith is being tested so it can be strengthened. It's not always an indicator of faith's absence but rather of faith's deficiency. Doubt can prove to be the birth pangs of a deeper, enlarged and stronger faith if we turn to the Lord in the midst of our doubts.

That is why the strongest of believers are usually no strangers to doubt. Look at who is doubting in our passage—John the Baptist. If anyone had reasons not to doubt, it was John the Baptist:

- When he was an unborn baby he leapt for joy in the womb of his mother Elizabeth at the announcement of the Messiah's coming.
- He went into the wilderness, lived an austere life of self-denial, boldly and fearlessly preached the Word of God and was unafraid to speak of God's judgment upon sinners.
- He saw Jesus coming to him at the Jordan River to be baptized, pointed at Him and said, "*Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!*" (John 1:29). Then with his own trembling hands he baptized Jesus, the Messiah.
- He saw the heavens open and the Holy Spirit descend in bodily form like a dove on Jesus and heard the voice of majestic glory say, "*This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased*" (Matthew 3:17).
- Jesus said of him: "*I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John*" (Luke 7:28).

Yet here John is locked in a filthy prison which has become his Doubting Castle. Jon Bloom says, "Doubts buzzed around his brain like the flies around his face." He may have wondered: Is Jesus the One or have I been mistaken? Is He really the Messiah? Am I a false prophet, leading others astray?

Who doubts? If John the Baptist doubted, I think it is safe to say almost every Christian will wrestle with doubt.

Why Do Believers Doubt?

Why did John the Baptist doubt and why do we believers wrestle with doubt? The reasons vary for different personalities, generations and temperaments.

- We have lost sight of all God has done for us. We become sullen, self-pitying and ungrateful. We don't remember His mercies so we doubt Him.
- Our view of God is too small. We have a limited picture of Who God is and what He should be doing in our lives. When our picture of God doesn't seem to match the reality of God, we doubt. It is a sign that our view of God needs to be enlarged.

- We know what we believe but no clue why we believe it. The foundations of our faith are shaky. Os Guinness says, “If there is ‘no reason why’ for faith, the time may come when there is ‘no reason why not’ for doubt.”
- We are discouraged with ourselves—sick and tired of our own sin. A while ago, John Piper was asked if he ever struggles with doubts about God. He was asked this shortly after his son’s baby had died. His answer was, “When do I doubt God? Not in tragedy, but when I see the slowness of my own sanctification.” I can identify with this struggle and wonder, “Is God at work in me? Why do I still struggle with the same things and make such slow progress?”
- We face inexplicable suffering. The examples of suffering abound and answers to the ‘Why’ question are few. But there is one answer that towers over the wreckage of humanity: the cross of Jesus where God bore the full weight of sin’s devastating destruction in His own body and soul. From the blood He shed, a new creation has been conceived in which—one day—all wrongs will be put right. God entered into and bore our inexplicable suffering.

There are many reasons for doubt but why is John the Baptist doubting? I would suggest it is because Jesus is not proving Himself to be the Messiah John expected. Notice the context in Luke 7:18, “*The disciples of John reported all these things to him...*” What did they report? All the things we have heard in the Gospel of Luke: Jesus healing the centurion’s servant from a distance by merely speaking the word. Then Dan preached last week about Jesus raising the son of the widow.

John hears these things and—surprisingly—starts to doubt. It could be because of the people’s response to these great miracles: “*Fear seized them all, and they glorified God, saying, ‘A great prophet has arisen among us!’ and ‘God has visited his people!’*” A great prophet? Why don’t they see this is the Messiah? He raises the dead and is more than a great prophet.

I think it also has something to do with what John sees Jesus doing. Look at the works of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke so far and you will see the accent is on mercy. He is doing wonderful things for the sick, the lame and the dead. He is preaching the gospel. What had John been preaching? In Luke 3:16, John prophesied that the Messiah would come “*...with the Holy Spirit and with fire.*” He preached about God’s wrath and said, “*Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees... His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor*” (John 3:9, 17). John is looking for a militant, aggressive Messiah Who would overthrow God’s enemies and bring God’s judgment on a sinful world. He did not expect the mercy he saw all the time from Jesus. So John is perplexed. Jesus is not meeting his expectations of judgment. Why hasn’t Jesus come and dethroned wicked King Herod? Why is John sitting here in this putrid prison cell when the Messiah is in his own backyard?

John doesn’t realize God intends the fire of His judgment to first fall on God’s own Son on a cross. Before God sends judgment on the sinful world, He will first let the judgment fall on His Son so His mercy can be poured out on sinners and nations. John doesn’t understand God’s priorities and timetable.

I suspect many of us wrestle with similar questions. We don't see God doing everything we expect in our lives. Our prayers don't seem to be answered in the way we want. We hope things would work out differently when following Jesus. Our agenda doesn't seem to be His agenda and we sometimes wonder, "Is Jesus the One or am I hoping in vain and mistaken in my faith?"

When the God of reality seems different from the God of your expectations, where do you go and what do you do?

What Should We Do With Our Doubts?

I think our text suggests four directives of what to do with our doubts. This is the way faith contends with unbelief.

1. Take Your Doubts Directly to Jesus

John does this and still trusts in Jesus, even with his doubts. He knows Jesus will tell him the truth. He needs to be reassured and hear from Jesus again so he sends his disciples to Jesus. (I'm sure he would have gone himself if he could have gotten out of jail.) He runs to Christ which is what we need to do with our doubts. We need to run to Christ not away from Him when we struggle with doubt. Don't let your doubt get such a hold on you that you start to live like an unbeliever and distance yourself from Him. Continue to live like a Christian even if you are not feeling like one right now. Heed the words of the hymn:

I must tell Jesus all of my trials;
I cannot bear these burdens alone;
In my distress He kindly will help me;
He ever loves and cares for His own.

(From I Must Tell Jesus by Elisha A. Hoffman)

2. Focus on the Essential Make-or-Break Issue

When you are doubting, clear the rubble and get to the heart of the question. The make-or-break issue of faith is: Who is Jesus? Is He the One? That is the only thing John needs to know in this moment. Luke repeats the question "*Are you the one?*" twice so we don't miss the point (verses 19 and 20). "Did I get it right about You, Lord?" It's as if John is saying, "I can bear the thought of having my head cut off in this prison and suffering but I cannot bear being mistaken about You, Lord Jesus. This is what my whole life and ministry have been about—preaching about You and preparing the way for You. I need some reassurance because if I'm wrong about You, I could not bear it. Are You the One?"

Clear the rubble and the thousand different questions and zero in on these questions like a laser beam: Is Jesus Christ Lord and God's promised Messiah? Is He God in human flesh and did His death on

the Cross atone for the sins of humanity and satisfy God's wrath so I can be reconciled to God? Did He rise from the dead? The resurrection of Jesus is the 'domino' question from which everything else rises and falls. Is He coming again? These are the make-or-break issues on which to focus.

The identity of Jesus Christ is the key that unlocks all the other promises of the Bible. The key that unlocks the bars of Doubting Castle is cross-shaped. Jesus is the Key. In 2 Corinthians 1:20, Paul tells us, "*For all the promises of God [no matter how many promises God has made] find their Yes in him [Jesus].*" If He is Who He says He is, we can trust every other promise God has made in the Bible. If God did not spare His own Son, how will He not also give us everything else we need? However, if Jesus is not Who He says He is then why should we believe anything else in the Bible? It all hinges on the identity of Jesus Christ. "*Are you the One?*" This is a question Jesus is happy to answer for everyone seeking Him. Praise God for that.

3. Examine the Evidence

Christianity is completely open to investigation. There are strong reasons to believe but if you don't know why you believe, you won't know why to not doubt. The Christian faith, and the Bible in which it is revealed, is resilient, robust and strong enough to handle any honest question we bring to it. God never tells us to shove our doubts in the cupboard or deny their existence but rather to examine the evidence.

Jesus does not rebuke John's disciples for asking the question, "*Are you the one?*" Instead, He provides them with strong and sufficient evidence to bring back to John. He confirms John's faith, first through His works and then through His Word. "*In that hour (the minute He was asked the question) he healed many people of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many who were blind he bestowed sight*" (Luke 7:21). Look at the work of Jesus Christ; examine the evidence.

Then look at the Word of God. "*And he answered them, 'Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them'*" (verse 22).

If you look at the cross references in your Bible, you will see Jesus is quoting from the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah 29:18-19, "*In that day the deaf shall hear the words of a book, and out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see. The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the LORD, and the poor among mankind shall exult in the Holy One of Israel.*" Jesus is saying, "John, read the Book and look at Me. Do you see I am the One?"

He also quotes Isaiah 35:5-6 which speaks of what will happen when God comes to save His people:

*Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;*

*then shall the lame man leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the mute sing for joy.
For waters break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;*

Jesus is saying, “John, I am the One. I’m not just another prophet but rather the Holy One of Israel—God in the flesh, come down to save His people. I am the One Who brings the Kingdom of God to earth but I will do it according to My agenda. There are priorities and right now My priority is proclaiming the gospel to poor sinners, not executing judgment on them. I was not sent into the world to condemn the world but that the world through Me might be saved” (John 3:17).

Jesus also alludes to Isaiah 61:1,

*The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor;
he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted...*

But Jesus stops there because of what comes next in Isaiah 61.

*...to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;*

John is sitting in prison and Jesus is saying, “John, you are going to have to suffer for My sake just as I will suffer soon on the cross. My priority right now is bringing good news and releasing people from captivity to Satan, not from captivity to the Roman Empire. I must get first things first. Suffering must first happen so salvation can be poured out.” John’s faith was fueled by God’s Word.

Jesus says, “*And blessed is the one who is not offended by me*” (Luke 7:23). If the God of reality seems different from the God of your expectations, what needs adjustment? Is it God or your expectations of Him? Are your expectations of God being shaped and informed by God’s Word? Even if He is not all you expected Him to be, Jesus says you are blessed if you accept Him as He is and as He is revealed in His Word. In the end, you will find He infinitely exceeds all your expectations.

Here is the challenge: Is your faith being fueled by God’s Word and the evidence found in the pages of Scripture? The Bible says, “*So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ*” (Romans 10:17). What are you doing? Are you feeding your faith and starving your doubts or are you starving your faith by staying away from the Word and feeding your doubts? Faith examines the evidence. Feed your faith and starve your doubts. Let your doubts serve as an indicator that your faith is insufficiently nourished by God’s Word. Let them be a stimulus to drive you deeper into God’s Word where your faith can be strengthened. If you doubt, what do you do with the evidence? Are your doubts or your faith getting more nourishment these days? Without a steady saturation in the Word of God, doubts grow like weeds. Feed on God’s Word, examine the evidence and look at Christ in the Word.

4. Trust That God Is Tender Toward Doubting Believers

Why did Jude say, “...*have mercy on those who doubt*” (Jude 1:22)? I think it is partly because Jesus is merciful to those who doubt. Not once do we see Him indignant, impatient or irritated with John’s question, “*Are you the one?*” Jesus could have said, “What? I just raised the dead! That widow’s son was dead and I brought him to life? How could you ask such an inane question?” Instead He is patient and merciful.

What does He do immediately after John’s disciples leave? Luke 7:24 records that He turns to the crowds who are probably shaken by the fact that their teacher—John the Baptist—is doubting. He then affirms John for his fortitude and steadfast self-denial—in contrast to the Pharisees who dressed in splendid clothing and made names for themselves. He affirms John as the forerunner prophesied by Malachi and says amazing words in verse 28: “*I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John.*” John is the greatest of the Old Testament, old covenant prophets because he is the direct forerunner of Jesus. It is his proximity to Christ that makes him great.

Jesus goes on to say something even more stunning: “*Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he*” (verse 28). The least believer in the New Covenant era is greater than John the Baptist? Yes, because we have seen the fullness and completion. We have seen Christ crucified, risen and now reigning at the right hand of the Father. The next event on God’s agenda is the return of Christ and on that day all doubts will vanish. Jesus says, “Lift up your heads, for your redemption is drawing nigh.” Realize what a great privilege it is to live in the ‘A.D.’ years, meaning ‘*anno Domini*’ —‘The year of our Lord.’ The only thing that holds Him back from coming again is His mercy for He does not wish any to perish but all to reach repentance.

When Does Doubt Become Deadly?

Jesus is tender and patient toward doubting believers. However, that ought not make us apathetic or complacent toward our doubts. Remember, doubt is always serious because it can be deadly or even fatal. Doubt is a flashing light on the dashboard of your faith telling you your faith urgently needs solidifying or strengthening. If you ignore that flashing light, your faith will break down.

Luke stresses that there are only two ways to respond to the gospel:

1. Accept God’s purposes and align yourself with God.
2. Reject God and find yourself outside God’s salvation.

“When all the people heard this, and the tax collectors too, they declared God just, having been baptized with the baptism of John, [having acknowledged they were sinners in need of repentance and

God's cleansing and salvation] *but the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him*" (Luke 7:29-30). Luke is reminding us that there are only two ways. Doubt is deadly when it is a cover up for a hardened heart of unbelief.

Today it seems doubt is fashionable. It is hip and cool to be non-committal and suspended in a perpetual state of indifference, believing nothing or saying, "I don't know what I believe but I know I don't believe this or that." Our culture applauds when we remain indifferent. About a hundred years ago, G.K. Chesterton said, "Merely having an open mind is nothing. The object of opening the mind, as of opening the mouth, is to shut it again on something solid."

Arrive at some convictions. Know what you believe and why you believe it. Being a resolute, confident, fully-persuaded, steadfast Christian will put you out of the mainstream in our culture. Even in Jesus day, doubt was glamorous and dogmatic conviction was despised. Jesus tells us that it has always been this way.

"To what then shall I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like?" [Then Jesus tells this story] *"They are like [little, bratty] children"* (Luke 7:31-32). Jesus knew what the kids were like and the nursery rhymes of His day. It was common for kids to play funeral and wedding games. You might think that morbid but consider the nursery rhyme 'Ring Around the Rosie.'

Ring-a-round the rosie,
A pocket full of posies,
Ashes! Ashes!
We all fall down

This little nursery rhyme is about death, morbidity and the plague. Jesus knew the nursery rhymes of His day and pictures kids sitting on a playground saying:

*'We played the flute for you, [we played wedding] and you did not dance;
we sang a dirge, [we played funeral] and you did not weep'* (verse 32).

In other words, you are never satisfied. No matter what tune is played, it's never good enough for you. Jesus is saying that is what these people are like. It is proven in the way they responded to John the Baptist:

*'For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine,
[You looked at his austerity and self-denial] and you say, [this man is out
of His mind or even worse] 'He has a demon.'* [we're not going to
follow a weirdo like that!] (Verse 33).

Then Jesus, the Son of Man, comes and is full of joy—celebrating as if there was a party. You looked at Him and said, "He needs to become more serious." *'Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a*

friend of tax collectors and sinners!' (verse 34). "We're not going to hang out with a loose guy like Jesus."

What is Jesus' point? Unbelief is not open to reason but is always changing its argument. It is not simply the absence of faith; rather it is the presence of active hostility in our hearts. There is something in our hearts that actively resists and hates the message of Jesus. Basically, we want to run our own lives and be in control. Many times our doubts are a facade or cover up. We have all these doubts and questions because we know if we believe in Jesus He's going to take control of our lives, change us and demand everything from us. We don't want that. There is a hardness of heart and active hostility in humanity against the ways of God. Jesus is saying, "Beware of doubt being deadly, of always being undecided and non-committal because that is an indication of a hardened heart." The problem is not with Jesus, His message or what God has revealed in the Bible. Most of the time, we who are full of doubts haven't even read our Bibles. The problem is with our hearts. Although we can know the truth, the problem is that our sinful hearts do not want to submit to God.

Take the advice of Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones and doubt your doubts. Don't deny or shove them away and think you can deal with them later. On the other hand, don't glamorize or celebrate them or pride yourself in being a doubter. Submit your doubts to the scrutiny of God's Word and bring them to the Lord Jesus Christ, under the authority of His teaching. Let your doubt become a bridge that carries you from a weak faith to a more confident faith.

Jesus says in Luke 7:35, "*Yet wisdom is justified by all her children.*" Second Timothy 3:14-15 says, "*But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.*" If you want to be wise, take your doubts to Jesus. Fill yourself with the teaching of His Word. Consider His life, miracles, death and resurrection and say to Him, "*I believe; help my unbelief!*" (Mark 9:24). When you take your doubts to Jesus, doubt your doubts and let Jesus in His wisdom teach you; you will find it true that He is the Way, the Truth and the Life for there is no other way of salvation but in the name of Jesus.

Let's pray.

Jesus, how well You know us. Your gaze penetrates us and Your Word searches us out. You know men of the 21st century just as well as You knew people of the first century and know exactly what is in our hearts. We thank You, Lord Jesus, that when we are struggling with doubt and honestly coming to You, You never push us away, get irritated or impatient with us. Instead, You are always ready to strengthen us in our faith. I pray, Lord, for the poor, pensive, doubting brothers and sisters in Christ who—like me—often need to have their faith strengthened. Would You draw us close to You and Your Word?

I also pray for the person who might have pride in his doubts and has no intention of investigating the evidence. Lord, I pray that by Your Spirit You would bring conviction of the urgency of resolving once for all the questions, “Who are You, Lord Jesus? Are You the One?” By the power of Your Spirit, would You be revealing Yourself to everyone as the Way, the Truth and the Life? We worship You in Your name. Amen.

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