

## Is Doubting a Gift from God?

1 Cor. 1:18-25: Luke 7:1-10, 18-23, 36-50

People say Leonard Cohen's songs are death-haunted and dark. Some say his songs are all great, deep, and truthful as well as surprisingly melodic & multidimensional. Most of all they make you think & feel. Ed referred to the song Anthem in Sunday School and pointed out the line, "**There is a crack, a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in.**" It's a song worth reflecting on. I was thinking about this sermon on doubt and Ed's comment caught my attention. Doubt is the crack that challenges our faith. **But since we are made in the image of God – is doubt a gift from God?**

Think of a time when you doubted someone or some information. Reflect about your logic as you lived through that experience. What did you do and think and feel as you began to doubt?

We all probably know the Bernie Madoff story of 2008. He took about \$64.8 billion from people who trusted him. What you may not remember is the scheme became obvious to financial investigator Harry Markopolos as early as the year 2000. But no one would listen to him. Harry repeatedly told the Securities and Exchange Commission that Madoff was a fraud. They never investigated. He said, "I gift-wrapped & delivered the largest Ponzi scheme in history to them, & somehow they could not be bothered to conduct a good investigation. They should have been able to shut Madoff down right then and there at under \$7 billion."

Markopolos first saw through Madoff in the late 1990s, when a hedge fund he worked for asked him to figure out how the financier Madoff was making money in derivatives so they could replicate his process. But Markopolos could not do it, because there was no sign of Madoff in the derivatives market. He said, "I called the people I knew on the trading desks. 'Are you trading with Madoff?' They all said no," he said. "If the 5 largest banks are not seeing your business, then you have to be a Ponzi scheme. It was not a hard case."

He sought to share his evidence with New York's Attorney at the time, but worried that he might be a Madoff investor. Markopolos became so paranoid, he tried to hand Spitzer his documents anonymously, but failed. Even though Markopolos was president of the Boston Security Analysts Society at the time, giving him the standing to simply call Spitzer and give him the evidence, his paranoid nature failed him. "I regret not calling him," Markopolos said.

This story triggers several questions like, why were so many people fooled? Especially over so many years? Why was Markopolos ignored, despite sharing evidence? Why didn't the authorities do a better job?

Please read Malcolm Gladwell's book, "Talking to Strangers: What We Should Know About the People We Don't Know," as well as the article, by Larry Getlen, This man has a BS detector so good it almost drove him nuts. Both explain a theory called the "**default to truth**," that comes from psychologist Tim Levine.

Based on the "**truth-default theory**," Gladwell writes, human beings are universally awful at understanding people, especially in detecting their lies. "Our operating assumption is that the people we are dealing with are honest. But on average, judges correctly identify liar's 54 % of the time - just slightly better than chance. This is true no matter who does the judging. Students, FBI agents, CIA officers, and Lawyers are terrible. Those who beat the odds, are rare."

Only when we experience a "trigger" - evidence of dishonesty so egregious it's undeniable - do we admit that person is a liar, Gladwell claims. "**Default to truth** becomes an issue when we are forced to choose between two alternatives," he writes, "one of which is likely and the other of which is impossible to imagine."

**It is good that it seems we were created by God to trust.** This is a trait that helps lead us to belief and faith in Jesus. This is what the Bible is about. And I think the argument **we should be more skeptical is also good.** We all get those

phone calls that we should be suspicious about. It is good for us to be warned about scams. The Markopolos / Madoff story is a good reminder that doubting is an important life skill. But so is trust! But deception is all around us.

Even though we do not like to doubt people, it makes us uncomfortable, but we need to do so more often and with more people than we are geared for. Gladwell is not asking us to be paranoid like Harry Markopolos, but he makes the case that doubt is not a bad thing. It plays a role in our lives, especially our faith lives. It is good and natural that even though it seems we are created to trust, the Bible, a book about faith, has stories and verses that highlight doubt. Clearly doing some questioning and doubting has some important benefits.

Quora, a web site, offers these thoughts from people about **the importance and benefits of doubt**. Diane F. Maltese, a Uber driver writes, "Doubt. My most annoying friend. It causes one to challenge the status quo, to face and overcome the fears and insecurities of life. To redefine success as you see it, to reflect on your life's journeys & to search for that silver lining at the end of the rainbow. Doubt makes one ask questions & to find new answers. In religion, creative doubt can play a role in keeping one's fundamental beliefs alive and vital."

Mason Hyatt, film maker reflects, "In general, doubt is not a bad thing when it's based on proper information and logical justification. It shows that you are keen & sharp when it comes to scaling things, people, and situations. Don't confuse it with paranoia. Paranoia is a disease."

Ed Stoddard, retired postal worker shares, "Doubt is part of our mind's defense system to protect us from falling for something before we are able to determine its value or the data's accuracy. Doubt is necessary as it makes it possible for us to disbelieve something when we have no proof that is true or real. Doubt helps make being conned by someone much more difficult. Without doubt we might believe anything. As said, it is absolutely necessary.

"But as with anything, it can be used way too often and inappropriately. Whether it is used reasonably depends on the individual. Someone who is very fearful toward things in their life might use it too often & inappropriately. Someone who finds trusting anyone, usually due to how they were raised and perhaps abused either physically and / or mentally, may have far too many doubts that make them suspicious of everything. So, doubt is a must (for our daily living) but it needs to be used reasonably.

"Even self-doubt can be beneficial when we use it to re-evaluate our motives for doing or thinking something but can be useless when used emotionally to destroy our own sense of worth." I will leave it to you to find more reasons why doubt is of benefit to you and I.

It was not a surprise to find there are quite a few web sites that talk about self doubt. We know some self doubt is valuable but too much hinders us. However, we are talking about doubt that relates to faith today. Doubt is defined as uncertainty of mind and lack of conviction.

The **most common objects of doubt** in the Bible are Christ's messiahship (Luke 7:19-23), miracles (Matthew 12:24-30), Jesus' resurrection (John 20:24-29), and Jesus' return (2 Peter 3:4). As we reflect on our own lives this is not a surprise. You could add to this list.

And these **four causes or sources of doubt** from the Bible also probably don't surprise us. First, **Satan** tries to get us to doubt. Genesis 3:4-6 is the story of Satan tempting Eve in the Garden. Also, we know Satan tempted Jesus.

Another cause is: **Unbelief** in an action of God's as Luke 1:18-20 shares. Zechariah, John the Baptist's father, did not believe the angel messenger. It is not unusual to wonder at times, is this really the Creator at work in us?

The third cause of biblical doubt is: **Worldly wisdom against belief in the cross** and the resurrection. Our reading from 1 Corinthians 1:18-31 demonstrates this common skepticism.

Fourth is **Spiritual instability** - James 1:6-8. It reads. "But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do."

Have you ever had doubts about your faith? At some point, everyone has asked nagging questions about, doubts about God, Biblical ideas, key elements of the Christianity, and unfairness in life. Despite the idea that we are created to trust, to default to truth, we need to value the benefits of doubt. And we need to value the cracks of light and faith. While it is not something we celebrate, doubt is part of the human condition. So much so, in fact, that the Bible contains many portraits of people who doubted, some of them great faith heroes.

Stories of doubt in the Bible include **Sara and Abraham** doubting their Creator's promise of a child. (Genesis 16-18) And **Gideon**, wanting proof that he was being called by God by testing God with the offering fire and fleece event, not once but twice. (Judges 6:33-40)

And then of course there is **doubting Thomas**. He was one of Jesus' disciples, who spent at least three years witnessing miracles, traveling with Christ, listening to Jesus' preach, and many hours learning about faith. But what occurred after Jesus rose from the dead? He doubted. He had a week for despair to grow, questions to develop, & doubt to gnaw on him.

It would be good to familiarize yourself with doubting Thomas' story in John 20:19-29 that is capped off with Jesus declaring, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." So, it's important to not doubt!

We can't help but feel sorry for Thomas, especially if we put ourselves in his shoes. We know Gideon tested God's call to him. And who would not disbelieve like Abraham and Sara?

Then in Luke 7 we read 3 stories contrasting an enemy soldier, a sinful woman, and John the Baptist. The centurion told Jesus to heal his servant by "just say the word." The woman worshiped Jesus in an unusual way and found salvation and forgiveness of sins. But John the Baptist's doubt, questioning, lack of faith in Jesus is important for us to take in. He should have had more trust and faith. Jesus' response to him was, have faith in what you see & hear.

But John was in prison, with his life in danger, was probably depressed and expected Jesus to bring in his kingdom soon. What is going on when the Bible points out John the believer in Jesus, is the one who had questions, but the woman & centurion, were the ones with faith?

Covid time has certainly raised people doubts in all kinds of things. Our view of the world these last two years certainly has raised up questions and challenged us to work on being hopeful. I have been thinking a lot about the relationship between questions, doubt, & hope.

Loretta Reynolds writes, "Sometimes we hear that we should not doubt, and we should not question; we should simply trust and believe." Obviously as the world is going, some leaders would like us to believe this. As well as many companies who try to sell us their products.

But we know when religious leaders have this attitude, they are asking us to trust and believe, not in God, but in their understanding of God. When I run into people who possess an absolute certainty about who God is and how God works, in many areas of life, I find it wise to approach with a healthy skepticism. There are times when it seems right to believe in miracles. But claiming to have all the answers about faith seems to be the opposite of trusting in a God of Mystery. The older I get the more doubts I have, but also, I'm more certain about some fundamental things.

In Isaiah 55:8-9, God says to us, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, my ways are not your ways. As high as the heavens are above the

earth, so my ways are beyond your ways, and my thoughts are beyond your thoughts.”

Paul reminds us in I Corinthians 13:12, “For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.” It is easy and dangerous to create God in our own image, which is why the Bible so often let’s us know to stay humble, before the mystery of God. It’s not good to treat God like purchases from a pop machine. Put in the right actions & proof, we receive the results we want.

Reynolds continues, “The ability to wonder, to ask questions, & to be okay with not-knowing, seems to be the stuff of faith to me. Because if we knew and understood and could really answer any question, we would not need God.

In a sermon St. Augustine said, “If you understand it, it is not God.” (Sermon 117 on John 1:1). God is Mystery and not a doctrine that can be explained fully explained in human words. That’s why faith is so important. It’s allowing the crack, the light, the questions, the doubt and even the anger to be in our lives. Trust is a choice that we are offered to take and live and be. Otherwise, we would simply be God’s unthinking robots.

Sue Monk Kidd wonders: “What has happened to our ability to dwell in unknowing, to live inside a question & coexist with the tensions of uncertainty? Where is our willingness to incubate pain & let it birth something new? What has happened to patient unfolding, to endurance? These things form the ground of waiting.

And if we look carefully, we will see that they are also the seedbed of creativity and growth - what allows us to do the daring and to break through to newness. It allows us to reimagine as we need, and our Creator wants. Creativity flourishes not in certainty but in questions. Growth germinates not in certainty but in upheaval. Yet the seduction is always security, certainty, rather than venturing; instant

knowing without testing, rather than deliberate choosing to trust waiting.”

Plus, hope comes out of creativity, patience, endurance, & growth, all being the products of questions and doubt. It is in the midst of doubt and uncertainty that we are invited to place our hope in the Almighty Creator. It is in the time of not-knowing that we choose hope & trust for light and direction, even if clarity doesn’t exist.

John the Baptist as well as we, need this verse from Proverbs 3:5. “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, & do not lean on your own understanding.” Jesus invited him to doubt his understanding of God, to doubt his trust in his understanding of God. Indeed, he and we are invited to doubt, but see what the Almighty is doing so we trust and hope in our Savior.

What we should be striving for is not absolute certainty, and our own way, but to be okay with not-knowing. To trust not in my own wants and knowledge, but in the One who is beyond my knowing. To believe not in what I believe about God, but to believe in the God beyond my understanding. To yield to the Almighty. In doing this my questions and doubts help open the crack that brings us light. They lead me to hope in the Divine Power, Love, & Mystery. The foundation of my faith should not be ideas, opinions, & even doctrines, but rather a Holy Divine Spirit which can never be fully known. If the focus of faith is in Jesus, then the focus of my living becomes a life centered on sharing Jesus’ Spirit of Love with others, over only living up to and adhering to a set of doctrines.

For me, doubt, the not-knowing, the questions lead me to a dependence, & a hope, & a default to trust that rests in a Divine Mystery of Jesus Christ, that can be relied on to sit with me in my doubt & walk with me through the valleys. So, “ring the bells that still can ring, forget your perfect offering – there is a crack in everything - that’s how the light get’s in!”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c8-BT6y\\_wYg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c8-BT6y_wYg)

