March 28, 2021

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LIKE AN INFECTION

Matthew 11:1-6

Mark 5:25-26 tells us about a woman who followed Jesus who had suffered from bleeding for 12 years. Mark says, “She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse.” Laurie, for quite a few years, could relate to that woman. She had a similar problem that just got worse. It turned out she had some fibroids that were the cause. Finally, after years, her doctor said she needed surgery. They could take the fibroids out, or she could have a hysterectomy. We fell prey to the modern day curse of the Internet. We wanted to be informed so we researched the issue on the Internet. We encountered an avalanche of hysteria about hysterectomies. It led us to doubt this was a good thing at all. Laurie opted for removing the fibroids. They did that successfully. A couple of weeks later the surgeon said he did not like how the cells looked in the pathology report. He was sorry, but she needed now to have the hysterectomy. Now we were concerned. The information we had encountered had created big questions. We had a lot of doubt. We were apprehensive about what this was going to mean for her.

Laurie had the surgery. It was successful. Since the surgery she has never felt better. It finally resolved the problem and freed her from something that had plagued her for years. She said, “I wish I would have known this. I should have done this years ago.” Unfortunately, we were both intimidated and paralyzed by doubt. Doubt can do that to you. As we continue looking at some of the hard things we must deal with to survive this world, today I want us to think about doubt. Is this going to solve all your problems with doubt? I doubt it. But it can and should help. Let’s look at Matthew 11:1-6.

JOHN BATTLED WITH DOUBT

John was in a gloomy fortress prison east of the Dead Sea. He was there because he told the truth. Matthew 14:3-5 says, “Now Herod had arrested John and bound him and put him in prison because of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, for John had been saying to him, ‘It is not lawful for you to have her.’ Herod wanted to kill John, but he was afraid of the people, because they considered John a prophet.”

The Herod family is hard to keep straight, because there were a lot of them and they had absurdly complex relationships. However, we know this Herod was named Herod Antipas. He was a political appointee of Rome who ruled over Galilee and Perea, to the southeast of Galilee. He had no rightful claim to rule over the Jewish people, except that Rome decided he would. He married a woman from a neighboring territory, the daughter of the ruler of that area. But on a trip to Rome he stopped at the home of his half brother, Philip. While he was there he decided that he had fallen in love with Philip’s wife, a woman named Herodias. This woman also was his niece! Herod had to have her, so he divorced his wife, and convinced Herodias to leave her husband and marry him. So now she was his niece, his sister in law and his wife. I told you their relationships were complex.

John as a prophet could not ignore what Herod was doing, so he publicly called him out. Herod had already had a PR problem with the Israeli people, and John’s public denouncements didn’t help him at all. The Jews didn’t want this Herod to be their ruler. They knew he was a player and a phony, and a lackey of Rome. It made Herod furious when John, who was extremely popular and got a lot of ink in the media, condemned him and his new wife, for it seriously complicated his image problem. He wanted to shut John up for good, but he knew if he had him killed he could kiss any hope of a decent standing in the eyes of the people goodbye. But he wanted to muzzle John, so he opted for putting him in prison. Why Herod thought that would be more acceptable to people is a mystery to me.

John was languishing in a hell hole of a prison. He began to question. He sent some followers to Jesus to ask, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?” This is surprising. John is asking if Jesus is the Messiah. This is unexpected because of what John had previously said. In John 1:19 a group of religious leaders, who were no fans of John, asked him point blank if he claimed to be the Messiah. He said plainly in verse 20, “I am not the Messiah.” In verse 24 some Pharisees question him about why he was baptizing people. In verses 26-27 he said, “I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.” Then in verse 29 he said of Jesus, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” In verse 34 he said of Jesus, “I have seen and I testify that this is God’s Chosen One.” He was declaring plainly that Jesus was, indeed, the Messiah. John knew Jesus was the Messiah. He said in John 1:31, “the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel.” The reason his ministry existed was to prepare people for, and point them to, Jesus as the Messiah.

So it comes as a stunner when John asks Jesus if he actually is Messiah. He is doubting. He is wondering if somehow he got it wrong, that he was mistaken about Jesus. John’s doubts seve as a cautionary tale for us. If John could fall prey to doubt, surely it can happen to us. In Matthew 11:11 Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist.” The words, “truly I tell you,” were Jesus’ formula for saying, “Hey, listen up. This is really important. Don’t miss this.”

What did Jesus want to make sure everyone understood? “Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John.” How many of us were born of women? If you don’t have a woman as your mother, you are not a human being. There are no human clones, none of us were created in a test tube in a lab, none of us have been planted here by aliens

Jesus meant that there has never been a human being greater than John. He was as good as it gets. He was the top of the heap. But now John is in a seemingly hopeless situation that is totally out of his control. This was not the way he expected things to go. Sitting in a miserable prison, wondering what was going on, the doubts began to creep in during the long, dark days and nights.

If John, one of the best human beings ever to live, a man of great faith and courage, could struggle with doubt, do you think we will be immune to it? Sometimes Christians think their faith is defective because they have had some doubts. Do you think John’s faith was defective? Jesus didn’t think so. Therefore, we’d better expect that we are going to have to do battle with doubt at some points in our lives.

The nature of faith makes it inevitable that we will have to deal with doubt. Paul said we walk by faith, not by sight. We don’t doubt what we can see, unless it’s on television or in a movie. I don’t doubt that there is an island off the coast of Southern California called Santa Catalina because I’ve seen it with my own eyes. However, if you tell me that angels are real, there is room for doubt because I’ve never seen one.

God had revealed to John at some point early on that Jesus is the Messiah. But human nature has a tendency to believe whatever it has seen most recently. John has been in prison, and all he’s seen is his cell. This is a tendency you see in the Old Testament. God used Moses to do some amazing things, including parting the Red Sea. The people thought that was awesome. But what happened when they got into the wilderness and the water ran short? They doubted God and threatened to run Moses out of town.

What this means for us is that there is room for doubt when it comes to God, because we can’t see him. To make the situation worse, if he hasn’t done anything dramatic recently we will tend toward doubt because, after all, what have you done for me lately?

DOUBT CAUSES PROBLEMSDoubt is troublesome. Just the word itself causes me problems. Can anyone tell me why it has a letter “b” in it? Why isn’t it spelled “dout”? It isn’t pronounced doubet. But there are bigger issues than that with doubt.

**It paralyzes us**

One of the better known verses about doubt is James 1:6. “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.” In verse 8 James wrote, “Such a person is double minded and unstable in all his ways.” A number of years ago while on vacation Laurie and I decided to do a little stand up paddle boarding. The place we chose to do it was inside a reef, so it was mostly protected from swells and waves, thus affording nice, calm water. At least that’s what we thought. Unfortunately this particular day there was a big swell running. We didn’t notice this fact. The swell was big enough that it was running over the reef. When we went out on our boards we found it was like trying to stay on a bucking bronco. The waves were tossing our boards all over the place. We struggled to stay upright on them. Calling it a stand up paddle board simply was not accurate for me that day. I renamed it a fall down paddle board. At one point a big wave knocked me off my board. It happened over a coral head, so when I fell I cut my leg on the coral. We were affected by the waves which were blown by the wind, and we were very unstable. Doubt causes us to be like that.

What does it mean to be unstable and double minded? If you are double minded you end up caught between two thoughts. You’re not sure. You can’t make up your mind. For my birthday we had a family dinner two days after my actual birthday. Laurie wanted to order some food from a restaurant to make it special. She did a mean thing to me. She offered me a choice between two good places. I was double minded. I couldn’t decide which one because I was caught in between them both. That’s what it means to be double minded. You can’t choose, you can’t commit.

Life continually offers us a choice between doing what God says, or trusting our own thinking and doing what we think is best. A person who is double minded gets caught in between. He thinks doing God’s will is what he should do, but he isn’t sure that’s going to work well, so he can’t commit to doing God’s will. That is an uncomfortable place to be, but more important, it is also dangerous. The chances are good that in that situation we will either end up disobeying God simply by the principle of “not to decide is to decide,” or we might choose to go our own way.

**It disrupts peace**

In Luke 24:37 Luke tells us that when Jesus, alive again after dying and being raised from the dead, appeared to the disciples they were frightened. He said, “Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds?” Well, they were troubled because doubts arose in their minds. They didn’t believe what they were seeing. They doubted, and the result was their hearts were troubled. That is what always happens to us when we doubt. It inevitably causes anxiety, uncertainty and absolutely robs us of peace.

Isaiah 26:3 says of the Lord, “You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you.” The way for us to have perfect peace is to be steadfast, trusting in God. When we lose trust and begin to doubt it inevitably disrupts peace.

**It robs us of spiritual power**

In Matthew 17 there is a story of a demon possessed man who was brought to the disciples, but they were unable to help him, even though they’d helped others. When Jesus came back he quickly dealt with the situation. Afterward the disciples asked Jesus why they weren’t able to handle the problem. Jesus said it was because they had so little faith. They had, apparently, some doubt. This suggests that when we doubt, by definition, we are not believing, and when we do that it short circuits our power spiritually.

You might think this doesn’t relate to you because how often do you encounter a situation like that? When was the last time you cast a demon out of someone? Let’s remember that spiritual power comes into play in much more of our lives than in dramatic situations like that one. In fact, it is an issue every day of our lives.

Spiritual power is what enables us to stand firm in faith, to love other people whether they are lovable or not, to obey God, to live with joy even in difficult times. When we doubt it short circuits that power, causing us to fail to trust God, resulting in compromise and disobedience to God, lack of love for others, and an emotional roller coaster ride where our joy and peace is totally dependent on our circumstances from one minute to the next.

**It distances us from God**

Notice James juxtaposed believing and doubt in James 1:6-8. He saw them as opposites. *If you do one, you are not doing the other*. Hebrews 11:6 says, “Without faith, it is impossible to please God.” Faith is the foundation of our relationship with God. That means if we are doubting there is no way for us to please God. In other words, there is going to be trouble in our relationship with him. When we doubt, we’re telling God we can’t trust him. Would you be surprised if that led to problems in your relationship with God?

THERE ARE CAUSES OF DOUBT

There are reasons people doubt God. Two of the biggest are revealed by John’s experience that we see in this passage.

**Faulty theology**

John started out with a premise that Jesus was the Messiah. There was no doubt in his mind. But now he is doubting. What happened? He thought something much like what his contemporaries thought. Messiah would bring in the Kingdom of God. His comment that Jesus would take away the sin of the world shows he knew Jesus was not just going to be a political deliverer. However, he surely had a sense that Jesus would change something significant. He thought that he would see something of the Kingdom of God beginning on earth in his lifetime.

In Matthew 3:11-12 John said, “I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand and he will clear the threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

John thought Jesus had his winnowing fork in his hand. He expected he was going to start burning up the chaff, and he knew that Herod was chaff. Shouldn’t that be starting pretty soon? Instead, John is sitting in a prison cell and aware that he might never leave it alive. This wasn’t what he expected. If Jesus wasn’t bringing in the kingdom, did that mean he wasn’t the Messiah at all?

We won’t have that exact flaw in our theology, but the faults we do have will cause doubt. We might think that God only will love and accept us if we are deserving of it. We might fear that he will run out of patience with us and will kick us out of his kingdom. We might think that God is not powerful enough or interested enough in our plight in this world to work on our behalf. That will certainly cause doubt.

One of the most common flaws is parallel to John’s error. We might think that if God loves us, he surely would want us to be happy, to have a good life. So he would give us good health, success, a pleasant standard of living. He wouldn’t let anything bad happen to us. God most assuredly loves us, and he does want what is best for us. But what is best for us does not usually match up with what we have determined will make us happy and give us a good life. When we think that way we are setting ourselves up for doubt.

**Disappointment**

A couple of weeks ago we looked at disappointment as a difficulty we must overcome. I pointed out then that we all go through various disappointments. That was certainly a factor for John. His circumstances were deeply disappointing. They were terrible. Unfortunately, if things get bad enough, it is only human to let doubt creep in, to begin wondering, “where is God in all this?”

That happened to Jeremiah, who felt like God was like a bear lying in wait for him by the side of the road. He said the bear had mangled him. But Jeremiah was not the only godly man whose circumstances got so bad he began to doubt. In Psalm 13:1 David wrote, “How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?” Things had gotten so bad for David that he felt like God had forgotten him. No, it was even worse than that. He thought God was deliberately turning away from him. Do I even need to mention Job? He also doubted God’s justice and goodness when there was no answer to his pain.

I can attest to the fact that when the pain gets deep enough, when it is hopelessly devastating, we might struggle with some doubts. We will wonder if God has either turned against us, or maybe he isn’t there at all. I know that because I’ve been there.

APPLICATION

The question about doubt we most need answered is, “what can I do about it?” We need to know how to handle it when the doubts crop up.

DON’T DENY THEM

It is common for Christians to try to suppress doubts. We tell ourselves not to listen to them. We tell our kids not to have them, even though we know they often do. We tell people it is wrong to doubt. The problem with this approach is that doubt is a bit like having an infection. Just denying that it is there is usually not a very effective way of treating it. Left unchecked, it can even kill you. The point is, if it is there, it is doing its work whether you admit it or not.

Suppressed doubt does the same things that doubt always does. It paralyzes us, disrupts our peace, drains us of spiritual power and cuts us off from God. To deal with an infection you have to drain the bad stuff out of there and cure the infection. And we have to do the same thing with doubt.

John did not pretend he had no doubt about Jesus. He faced it and did what he needed to do to resolve the doubt. He sent friends to ask Jesus if he was, in fact, who John thought he was. Job and David both voiced their doubts to God. That’s what we need to do as well. When we have doubts we need to tell God about them. We need to ask him to resolve them and strengthen our faith. God will answer your prayer just as Jesus answered John’s question.

Be careful here. Our tendency is to tell God how to answer our prayer, how we want him to resolve our doubts. You might ask God to do some dramatic, miraculous thing to answer your doubts. I read the words of one pastor who talked about a time when as a teenager he had a huge battle with doubt. So at one point as he was alone in the woods he set some sticks on the ground in the shape of a cross. Then he prayed, “God, if you are real, show me by just moving these sticks.” God didn’t move the sticks. But God would eventually answer his prayer in other ways.

Don’t tell God how to answer your prayer, simply ask him to strengthen your faith, to resolve your doubt. There are many ways God may do that, and he will do it in his own timing. It may take years even, but he will do it. The problem with this, of course, is you are asking the very one you are doubting to alleviate your doubts. Even worse, James said we should ask without doubting. So we must take our doubts about God to God without doubting! How do we do that? I guess in a way we must give God the benefit of the doubt. We must exercise faith, deliberately choosing to believe God will respond. And we may need to be patient in waiting for him to do so.

For most of my life I suffered from terrible canker sores. For me they were big and long lasting and they made life miserable. I searched for some cure, but nothing worked. One person told me that taking lysine, an amino acid would help. So when I got a canker sore I took lysine. It did no good at all. It didn’t help even a little. I thought I should not give up easily, so I tried again, though I didn’t think it would work. I doubted it. And again, it didn’t. So I added lysine to my list of failed treatments. Years later another friend suggested lysine and I explained about the failed lysine experiment. This friend said, “That’s not how it works. You have to take it as a supplement every day of your life, and over time it will help.” I doubted it would work. But I chose to exercise some faith, to try despite my doubt. To my surprise, after many months I began to realize I was having the sores less frequently and when I had them they were much less severe. It has actually worked! So now I am like the dinosaurs from Jurassic Park, totally lysine dependent. But I had to give it the benefit of the doubt and exercise some faith to find that out.

FIX YOUR THEOLOGY

John had to accept that Jesus could be Messiah but not do things the way John thought he was going to do them. He had to accept that his preconceived messianic theology could be wrong. Probably the biggest way our theology causes doubts has to do with expecting God to give us circumstances that we deeply desire and to not let hardships rule our lives or tragedy devastate them. We go through those disappointments and they plant doubts that God is even there at all, or that if he is, he cares about us.

That is a theological error. It is believing that God has promised to make our lives in this world wonderful. It is failing to note that Jesus said we would have trouble in this world, that we are blessed if we suffer with him, that we should expect to be persecuted. We should remember that Peter said we should not be surprised when fiery ordeals befall us. We have to remember that Jesus said we should live for his kingdom, and focus on eternity, not on having a delightful life in this world.

Recently I was talking to Toby and Anna and somehow we happened to discuss some friends of ours who are around their age. The parents of this young couple have given them a house. What a huge advantage for a young couple to have a house in San Diego with no rent or mortgage payment. As we talked about this I told them about 2 other couples we know that are about the same age whose parents have done the same thing. They started kidding me. “Hey, what’s wrong with you guys? How come we didn’t get a house?”

Fortunately, they were kidding. But what if that was their expectation? They’d be in for some serious disappointment that could cause them to object I don’t really love them. But I never promised them I would do that for them, because I can’t. Our problem is that we easily get expectations of things God has never promised us. We have to fix our theology, pay attention to who God is and what he actually has promised us. When we do that we will see that he is fulfilling his promises.

PAY ATTENTION TO THE EVIDENCE

Jesus’ answer to John’s question was to tell his messengers, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see. The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.” Compare those words with what Isaiah in Isaiah 35:5-6 said would happen when Messiah came. “Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer and the mute tongue shout for joy.” In Isaiah 61:1 the prophet quoted Messiah saying, “The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners.”

In other words, Jesus said, “Tell John you are seeing me do exactly what the prophets said Messiah would do.” John needed to be reminded of the evidence. Jesus was just saying to John, “You need to quit looking at your situation, quit focusing on your idea of how things should go, and look at what I am doing.” When John did that he would have known Jesus was exactly who John had thought he was.

You might object, “Yes, John could do that, but we can’t watch Jesus doing those things. If we saw him doing miracles now we wouldn’t doubt.” Hold on. Remember that John couldn’t see Jesus doing those miracles either. He was in a prison cell. All he could do was rely on what the eyewitnesses told him they saw Jesus doing. That is ***exactly what we must do!*** When we doubt, we need to go back to the truth as relayed to us by eyewitnesses. Oh yes, Jesus healed people, he walked on water, he calmed a storm at sea, he even raised some people from the dead, he died on that cross, and he finally conquered death himself. This is what our faith is grounded in. We trust in the truth, the facts of his life, especially when we can’t see what he is doing in our circumstances right now.

We all suffer from what I call chronological myopia. We tend to only be able to see what is happening in our lives in the very narrow time frame of right this minute. We lose sight of what God has done in our lives in the past. We forget what God has done in our lives, and we forget the incredible things he did when Jesus walked on this earth. We need to ground our faith in these ***facts***, not in present feelings.

WATCH OUT FOR THAT IDOL

I’m going to throw in one factor that has to do with doubt that is not mentioned in this incident with John. This comes out of my experience, so it’s not gospel. However, I’ve seen it happen often enough I know it is a real thing we need to be aware of. I will illustrate it with one example that I saw, though I have seen many others.

Years ago there was a guy in our ministry at the time who was a really dynamic guy. He was a charismatic leader. He had been on the staff of another church previously and was a real asset in our church. But then, seemingly out of the blue, he began having some struggles. He just seemed like he was a different guy. After a while he revealed that he was having doubts, questioning some things about his faith. I recall meeting with this guy with several other godly men as we tried to help him work through his doubts. Coming out of the meeting I felt we had done no good whatsoever. My sense proved accurate. It wasn’t too much later that he began to let it be known that he wasn’t sure he believed at all anymore. It was mystifying. Why was this happening? He had been a committed follower of Jesus for many years. It made no sense. And then it did. He left his wife and his kids for the woman he had been having an affair with. It became very obvious why he was doubting. His doubts allowed him to deny his faith which would call his affair and subsequent abandonment of his family clear disobedience to God. Take away the faith, and he had freedom to do what he had decided he wanted to do.

If you have a big struggle with doubt, look out. It is possible that there is something you’ve decided you want more than you want to know and serve God. Look for that, and if you find it, run from it, for it is going to destroy your soul.