

SOME NEGATIVE THINKING, TOO, PLEASE

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Mark 9:14-24

Somewhere I read a story about a group of the nation's top entertainers who were gathered one evening at the Friar's Club. They got to reminiscing about the "good old days" and, as the hours passed, they grew rather sentimental. After a while, George Burns went over to the piano and began to play "There's No Business Like Show Business," and everyone joined in singing with great gusto.

A little later, George Jessel stood up and, with great emotion, said, "The show must go on. The show must go on." All over the room heads nodded in silent assent and then, from the back of the room, Groucho Marx brought a swift end to the syrupy sentimentality of the moment by calling out, "Why?"

They were so angry with him they decided to take away his membership in the club. However, he heard about it and quit first. In his letter of resignation he wrote, "I refuse to belong to any club that will accept me as a member."

Well, in this day of the almost un-American "yes man," when ready-to-wear clothing and pre-digested breakfast food are the order of the day, when we make our grand pretensions and glibly quote philosophies of life we have never thought through and would never dare to practice, in a day like this it is good for somebody to ask the simple question: "Why?"

We do so many things because we have always done them. We think so many thoughts because we've always thought them. We go through so many motions because they are the motions through which we have always gone. And what we desperately need is someone with enough

moral courage and mental shrewdness to ask the hard, blunt questions which help us see the triviality of it all.

So, in a day when all the emphasis seems to be upon the power of positive thinking, I stand to urge: Some Negative Thinking, Too, Please!

There Are Two Kinds Of Doubters

There are those who love to doubt and use their scepticism as a shield from their accusing conscience. Psychologists would say they are using their doubt as a defense mechanism. They doubt, not because of any real intellectual perplexity, but because they do not wish to make the agonizing readjustments which would be required should they discover the Gospel to be true.

As one perceptive writer said:

“Their trouble is not that they’ve seen through religion, but that religion has seen and is seeing through them, and they don’t like it. For while it is true that we live only as deeply as we believe, it is also true that we believe only as deeply as we live.”

But there is another kind of doubter. This is the one of whom I preach this morning. He is the sincere agnostic. The one who is distressed by his doubts. The twentieth century child of the first century father who came to Christ one day and said:

“Lord, I believe. Help Thou my unbelief.”

There is hope for a fellow like that. There is hope for the man who is tired of his painful uncertainty and longs for the peaceful rest which can only come when life is built upon the impregnable rock of a great assurance. And if that one is you, what I want to say will not completely resolve all your problems or replace your agnosticism with conviction, but I trust it will help you turn the corner of your doubts and set your course toward the day when you can say with Paul: “I know whom I have believed.”

The first thing I want to urge is that you cease looking upon your doubt as a sin. For as I read my bible and study life, I find that --

Doubt Is Pretty Normal.

That may come as a shock to you. In the parlance of religion, “doubt” has had little or no place. “Faith” has been the big word. Anyone who was guilty of doubt was cast into the Siberian wasteland of social, intellectual and religious exile.

Well, faith is the big word. It is the giant word in our Christian gospel. Without it we could not exist. But having said that, we have done nothing to provide a solution to our doubts. And we all have them. Let there be no denial of that!

Is there one among us this morning who has never doubted the assumptions on which he was brought up? Is there one among us who has not wandered aimlessly through the withering wilderness of uncertainty about the great issues of life:

God.

Man.

Life.

Death.

Heaven.

Hell?

No! Every one of us has asked sharp questions about the rhyme and reason of things as they are, because doubting is a part of life.

We sing Martin Luther’s hymn, “A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing,” and we think, Surely Luther never knew the lonely hours we have known when the anchor rope of our faith lay broken and we have been left to drift as a ship at sea without a rudder. But listen to what he writes in one of his volumes, “For more than a week Christ was wholly lost. I was shaken by desperation and blasphemy against God.”

John Knox, the great Scotch reformer, of whom it was said,

“Mary, Queen of Scot, fears his prayers more than all the armies of the world.”

Here was a man of almost divine commitment who one night, burdened by the weight of a nation which was lost, wandered out into the midnight blackness, prostrated himself on the dewy soil of his garden and prayed:

“God, give me Scotland or I die!”

That was the same John Knox who tells us of a time when his soul knew “anger, wrath and indignation which it conceived against God, calling all his promises in doubt.”

When I preached in Bristol, England, we were privileged to have the boy’s choir from the George Muller Orphanage singing in our service. As those lads sang of the faith which they had found in this Christian home, my mind went racing back to the stories my father often told of George Muller’s faith. He maintained his noble work without ever asking a single person for a single penny. Instead, he leaned wholly and solely upon prayer and faith. And yet, when he was once asked whether he had ever had doubts of his religion, he replied,

“Yes, I doubted once for five minutes!”

Well, most of us would confess that our doubts have lasted longer than those of George Muller. We are much more akin to William Lyon Phelps, the famous graduate of Yale who says in his autobiography:

“My religious faith remains in possession of the field only after prolonged civil war with my natural, skeptical mind.”

Turn to your bible and you will find this Book of Faith is also filled with the stories of people who struggled with their unbelief.

There was Gideon who cried:

“If the Lord is with us, then why has all this befallen us?”

There was Jeremiah who shook his fist at heaven and called God
“a deceitful brook,” and
“waters that fail,” crying,
“Cursed be the day on which I was born!”

Even the Psalmist, who sends our soul into the stratosphere of the spirit with such phrases as: “The Lord is my Shepherd I shall not want,” and “Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me,” in the 23rd Psalm, only a few verses before, in the 22nd Psalm, is heard to say: “My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me? Why art Thou so far from helping me?”

Oh, my doubting friend, do not despise your capacity to doubt. It puts you in company with the saints. It is one of your most glorious attributes. For as someone has said:

“One who has never doubted has only half believed!”

There is a real kinship between doubt and pain. For while pain is a warning of disease, it is also a sign of life. Only the living can experience pain. Even so with doubt. For while doubt may bring on a fearful lonesomeness of spirit in which it seems as if even God Himself has disappeared into some black void beyond the stars, doubt is also a symbol of hope. The very shadow it casts is evidence that beyond, behind and above it shines a light which will never die.

Yes, doubt is a symbol of hope, if it is channeled in the right direction. For the keenest faith is that which has been hammered out on the hard anvil of disbelief. Which leads me to this second thought --

The Right Kind of Doubt Is a Healthy Thing.

I love those lines by Tennyson when, in his poem The Ancient Sage, he writes:

“Cleave ever to the sunnier side of doubt,
And cling to faith beyond the forms of faith!
She reels not in the storm of warring words,

She brightens at the clash of ‘Yes’ and ‘No’,
She sees the best that glimmers through the worst,
She feels the sun is hid for but a night,
She spies the summer through the winter’s bud,
She tastes the fruit before the blossom falls,
She hears the lark within the songless egg,
She finds the fountain where they wailed ‘Mirage’!”

To that one who is plagued with doubt this morning I say,
“Cleave ever to the sunnier side of doubt.”

Make sure yours is a really inquiring spirit, a truly testing mind.
Strive for the right kind of doubt, the kind of doubt which will doubt your doubts!
Strive for the right kind of skepticism, the kind of skepticism which will be skeptical of your skepticism!

To be a Christian you don’t have to hang your brain in the cloakroom each time you enter the church. As someone has said,

“Christianity is not a questionable religion, but Christianity *is* a religion which lets you ask questions.”

One of the reasons why the right kind of doubt is a healthy thing is because --

God Invites It.

Listen to the voice of scripture:

“Come now and let us reason together.”
“Prove me now, saith the Lord of Hosts.”
“Try the spirit’s to see if they be of God.”
“Test all things; hold fast to that which is good.”

As David Wesley Soper emphasizes in his fascinating book Epistle To The Sceptics, “God is not afraid of human thought; He fears, for our sake, only the absence of it.”

The attitude of Jesus is a good illustration of that. There have always been those who sought for ready-made, on-the-spot answers to their problems. But Jesus has never supplied them. He seemed more concerned to stimulate thought than to supply His hearers with a satchel full of clichés they could parrot whenever a question reared its ugly head.

He didn't want his followers to be "little men who knew all the answers, but missed the big questions"—who could "trot out slick solutions for every problem"—but what he lived and died to supply was a new life principle which would enable us to courageously face our problems and do it victoriously. And then, knowing we would need some encouragement along the way, He promised a divine companionship saying, "Don't be afraid. I'll be with you. Always!"

God does not tell us all we want to know. He does not absolve us from the necessity of thinking out things for ourselves. Rather, after setting the sail of our intellectual craft in the right direction, He puts the questions before us and extends the invitation:

"Come now and let us reason together."

The right kind of doubt is a healthy thing because God invites it.

The right kind of doubt is a healthy thing because --

Truth Demands It.

Every one of us has "the itch to know" and while we are sometimes willing to be regimented in other areas of life, there is something within us that recoils at the insistence that we goose-step in the pattern of our thoughts.

In his book, The Tragic Sense of Life, Unanumo, the Spanish mystic, gives a rather startling benediction when, at the conclusion of his volume, he writes:

"May God deny you peace, but give you glory!"

And yet, while that benediction startles, it also stimulates! As we let it sink in we begin to see that only as we grapple with the big questions of life are we going to have a life worth living.

I think Robert J. McCracken is right when he says there must always be a place for reverent agnosticism. The kind of agnosticism Paul expressed in his letter to the Corinthians:

“Now we see through a glass darkly...now I know in part.”

As a matter of fact, as Dr. Soper suggests:

“God is much more of an unbeliever than any atheist. He does not believe at all, not even a little bit, in the false gods we prefer to Him. Our man-made gods of race and class; of nation and creed. When men refuse to be skeptical, as God is skeptical, bigotry, hypocrisy and cruelty cripple human life and enslave the human spirit. When men refuse to be skeptical, as God is sceptical, then insanity dethrones sanity and life becomes a mad, wild jungle. Skepticism is neither more or less than man’s necessary effort to distinguish between sense and nonsense in every dimension of his world.”

Certainly we need some great beliefs!

Certainly we must have some great convictions.

But there are some things we ought to doubt, too!

There are some things we ought to disbelieve.

Take a hard look at our world. Subject it to the penetrating search light of your Christian conscience and you will find whole hunks of our thoughts and habit patterns which ought to be doubted. And, if you’ll go back through history, you’ll discover that people who have really set our world on its proper, moral, intellectual and spiritual axis are those who dared to oppose the crowd and stand up and say:

“I don’t believe it!”

There was a time when just about everybody believed the world was flat. They thought the horizon marked the end of the earth. But there were a few who dared to brave the tide and say:

“I don’t believe it!”

And they pressed on with doubt until they got to truth.

There was a time when nearly everyone believed that steamships could never be built to cross the ocean. One man even wrote a book proving it. He showed that no steamship could possibly carry enough fuel to keep its engines going across the ocean. Well, there were those who dared to say:

“I don’t believe it!”

They went to work and the very first steamship to cross the Atlantic under its own power carried a copy of the book which said it couldn’t be done!

Galileo was right when he called doubt the father of discovery. Oh, it’s true that sometimes in their quest for truth honest doubters have made mistakes. They have “thrown out the baby with the bath or cast away faith with folly, character with its caricatures.” But the right kind of doubt is nevertheless a healthy thing because God invites it and truth demands it.

The right kind of doubt goes on doubting until it learns to disbelieve its disbeliefs. And, as you learn to doubt your doubts, you also learn to believe your beliefs. Which leads to this final thought. The only way to replace doubt with faith is to begin where you are. So --

Start Living by What You Can Accept and Stop Living by What You Cannot Accept.

Your brittle belief may be a spark so small as to be unseen, but given a chance it will grow into a great conflagration which will cast its light from sky to sky. It may be but a single star, but pursued far enough, it will lead you to the Babe of Bethlehem. So begin where you are.

Live by what you can accept rather than by what you cannot accept.

And just as sure as there is a God in heaven, He will blaze a trail before you through the fog of uncertainty and the mist of doubt until at last a new horizon breaks upon you and, out of your soul comes the cry: “I know. I know. I know Whom I have believed.”

Our own Curtis Nims put it this way:

“There is hope for a person who lives by his belief. There is no hope for a person who lives by his disbelief.

There is hope for the person who holds the door ajar. There is no hope for the person who shuts the door.

There is hope for the one who cries, ‘Maybe.’ There is no hope for the one who says, ‘Never.’

There is hope for those who say, ‘Perhaps.’ There is no hope for those who cry out, ‘We know it can never be.’”

And so, this morning, I urge you to doubt your doubts. Join those who have learned a higher scepticism. A scepticism which is skeptical of their scepticism. And having pursued it far enough, they have learned, at last, to disbelieve their disbeliefs.

In a day when the emphasis is upon the power of positive thinking, I stand to urge

Some Negative Thinking, Too, Please!

Let’s have some negative thinking about our negative thoughts.

Let’s doubt our doubts.

Let’s become skeptical of our scepticism.

Let’s start living by what we can believe instead of what we cannot believe.

Let’s start nurturing the little seed of faith we do possess, giving it room to grow.

Let’s leave the foothills of our disbelief and push on for the higher ground of light and truth, whispering as we go:

“Lord, I believe. Help Thou my disbelief!”