

Belief 2

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John 10³¹⁻³⁹/ John 14⁸⁻¹⁴/Romans 6¹⁵⁻²³/

The great test of belief in Jesus is that we do the works He does. This sounds terribly scary until we realise that the 'works' He speak of are works of faith; works inspired simply by faith in God and so even the smallest thing done at the inspiration of God in us becomes, in us, a work that Christ is wonderfully pleased with. And He allows us to begin small and to practice and grow in our life of faith. We do not begin piano by playing a concert piece by Bach or Mozart but we will get there if we practice.

The key, however, is belief. Jesus says 'Believe and you will do...' We are invited first and foremost always to **believe!** In coming to understand the nature of believe I said last week that we cannot do so without acknowledging the things with which belief is found.

Three things around which belief wavers/ on which belief relies...

1. **Trust.** Trust lies at the heart of belief. We cannot believe in that which we do not trust. That is why issues which sabotage our ability to trust will also sabotage our ability to believe God. As much as we might want to believe – if our trust has been greatly betrayed in the past our ability to believe will also be damaged.
2. **Intimacy or vulnerability:** Why is the word 'heart' so closely associated with the Gospel in the Bible? Because the heart represents all that is truly us; the deep parts of us; the intimate part of us and it is this part God is interested in. What we treasure is found in our hearts.

²¹**For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matthew 6)**

Intimacy is knowledge of one's heart and it is this knowledge which invites and nurtures belief because what is of and from the heart is essentially trustworthy. Belief requires the heart to grow. We need to be careful here. Some things masquerade as intimacy. Sex for example appears to be and feels like intimacy but it is really only intimacy of a narrow kind and it does not, in fact, guarantee deep knowledge of the other except in a physical way. Men can engage in sex without any real intimacy and still enjoy it. That is, perhaps, one reason why men can become addicted to sex more easily than women. Women, I think, find it much harder to treat sex like this.

3. **Commitment:** Belief and commitment go together. No matter which way you look at it belief entails commitment – at least it does from the point of view of the Bible. To be a believer in the NT implied as a matter of course that one was prepared to give up one's life. Hence Paul's linking of our sharing in the resurrection life of Christ by virtue of our commitment to obedience.

What then? Should we sin because we are not under law but under grace?

By no means!

Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? (Romans 6)

Belief and commitment go hand in hand and this really stands in contrast to the much tamer view of belief we find in Western culture today which takes the form of what one might call 'mental assent.' Thus, to most people in our culture when you talk about belief you are referring more to their willingness to accept the existence of such a thing. When I say I believe in marriage, therefore, it really means, for most people, the same thing as if I said, I believe in cars! In other words, I believe such a thing exists – **I know such a thing to be there!** In no way does this imply any commitment on behalf of the speaker. And so writer and atheist Bertrand Russell will say such things as this in regard to belief...

I would never die for my beliefs because I might be wrong.

But for Jesus belief implies commitment. There is no belief without commitment. The scriptures are clear on this. For example, Jesus resisted all attempts by the authorities of the day to provide evidence on which they should believe. You see they, like Bertrand Russell, refused to commit to belief without some kind of proof and so they demanded miracles, Jesus' response was to say...

³⁹ **"An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah." (Matt 12)**

In other words, 'You want proof before you believe but no such proof will be offered. Rather you must commit in order that you might believe.' Again Dietrich Bonhoeffer will say this, **"Unless he obeys, a man cannot believe."**

And this, of course, represents a huge problem for Christians today in communicating belief to our culture because when we use the language of belief we find ourselves talking at cross purposes with people who are not used to this idea of commitment being attached to belief. The Church has come to value belief and place huge value on it but our materialistic scientific world has, for a long time, dismissed belief as being something akin to superstition. So Mark Twain will say...

In religion and politics, people's beliefs and convictions are in almost every case gotten at second hand, and without examination.

Compare this with a further quote from Anthony Farindon the famous English preacher who lived in the 16th century, '**Talk what we will of faith, if we do not trust and rely upon Him, we do not believe in Him.**' And this begs the question which each of us should ask ourselves at the beginning or end of each day... "How will I or, indeed, **how have I**, trusted in God today?" What concrete evidence is there in my life of having trusted God today?

For our culture belief is very much like the young paratrooper who was learning to jump, and he was given the following instructions: First, jump when you are told; second, count to 10 and pull

the ripcord; third, in the unlikely event that it doesn't open, pull the second chute open; and fourth, when you get down, a truck will take you back to base. The plane ascended up to the proper height, the men started peeling out, and the young paratrooper jumped when told. He counted to 10 and pulled the cord, but the chute failed to open. He proceeded to the backup plan. The second chute also failed to open. "Oh boy," he said. "When I get down, I suppose the truck won't be there either."

Now I must confess to you that, though I have worked at this for some times, some days when I have walked through the day entirely under my own steam; without any reference to God, without hardly a thought to what God might have me do or say. There is no evidence, I imagine on days like this, that I trust in God. And something further occurs.

You see our lives appear to have a trust vacuum and if we don't trust in God we can be absolutely sure that we trust in something else. In our day and age science and technology have gained a considerable following but self-worship, self-sufficiency and self-trust also carry a decent following. And our culture is enthralled by such objects of trust. We truly believe in them and we imagine them to be proven articles of faith. And so often we find that what truly lies behind these objects is self. And self is precisely what is enthroned by those who will not believe. Thus Goethe will say...

As soon as you trust yourself, you will know how to live.

Intimacy **and** belief; Trust **and** belief; Commitment **and** belief. These three carry our belief and give it wings. They embody belief and they form a bulwark against the world's lesser view of belief. But there is a fourth partner to belief which is often contrasted with belief by the world and made to look as if it was an enemy of belief and this is knowledge or understanding.

On the one hand the world elevates understanding to the level of a guarantor against the vagaries and inconsistencies of belief. It is, in other words, much better to understand something than it is merely to believe. The statement 'I believe' carries far less weight in this scientific age than does the statement 'I understand.' Knowledge is power. What we know is something we can be sure of. What we believe exists, so it seems, in that half world between superstition and fact, myth and reality. Belief has come to mean, in many quarters, a poorly considered superstition without any basis in fact at all.

In religion and politics, people's beliefs and convictions are in almost every case gotten at second hand, and without examination. (Mark Twain)

With most men, unbelief in one thing springs from blind belief in another.
(Georg Christoph Lichtenberg)

Man is a credulous animal, and must believe something; in the absence of good grounds for belief, he will be satisfied with bad ones. (Bertrand Russell)

For Christians, however, belief and understanding stand in almost the opposite relation to each. For we who follow Jesus it is belief which underpins understanding and not the other way

around. **We believe that we might understand**; the world will only believe if it first understands and, what's more, it is sure that this can be the only legitimate basis for belief.

But Christ said something quite different. His concern always was for belief. Belief expressed as trust, commitment and obedience. It is this which leads to knowledge of God. As He said to the Jews...

³⁸But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father.” (John 10)

If you can't believe my words, says Jesus, believe then because of the works I do... why? Because only through belief will you come to understand. **'so that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father.'**

I have not time this morning to go further than this. Indeed, it is probably not necessary since the key question for us in regard to belief is a simple one. Not that we understand first – because as we've just said, understanding will come later. Rather the question is – will we trust God with our lives? Will we commit to God, will we enter into a new relationship with God, will we open our hearts to God today?! This, in fact, is the key question for us every day. Every day God knocks at the door of our heart and asks gently to come in. Each and every day we need to say to Him – Yes! Lord, please come in. I wonder if we might do that together this morning?