Faith & Doubt: Week Two
Beginning with the book by John Ortberg

“I do believe; help me with my unbelief!”
(Mark 9:24)

Faith is a free surrender and a joyous wager on the unseen, unknown, untested goodness of God.
(Martin Luther)

When Smart People Disagree…
All of the different faith structures, denominational questions, and ways to interpret the record of Scripture leave us knowing this… everybody can’t be right and it’s likely on some points each of us will end up having been wrong. According to William Clifford, a philosopher-mathematician who wrote an influential essay called, “The Ethics of Belief”, it is “always wrong, everywhere, for anyone to believe anything on the grounds of insufficient evidence.” In other words, if we can’t know for sure, Clifford believes that the only appropriate response is not to commit to any one viewpoint. This is the posture of agnostics. We’d all like to know, not just to trust and hope, but is the answer really to say if we can’t know we won’t commit? What would such a life look like?

Where in your own life have you had to commit before you “knew”?

Was the result good or bad? Are you sorry you made a choice, right or wrong?

Would you refuse to choose at all if you faced the same circumstance again or would you choose one way or the other again and go forward?

When Neutrality Is a Bad Choice…
Another philosopher, William James, responded to Clifford’s advice by saying that staying in doubt – which in this case means refusing to make a decision to take one course over another – is the wrong thing to do when 3 conditions are met:
- When we have live options (choices are still before us)
- When the stakes are momentous (the result of the choice matters greatly)
- When we must make a choice (not to decide is to decide)

What he’s reminding us of is that fence-sitting rarely yields progress in life, or in faith. Ortberg puts it this way: “I have to spend my life praying or not praying, worshiping or withholding worship. I have to be guided by some values and desires. And then I have to die. I must give my life in total, in full, without the luxury of holding something back for the second hundred years. My life is the ballot I cast – for God or against him. My brain cannot provide the certainty that I’m betting my life on the truth. My mortality will not provide the luxury of waiting until I know for sure. There is one road to certainty –
through a door marked “death.” Then I will know, or there will be no me left to know. But I need to decide how I will live on this side of the door. Once we have been born, trying to put off deciding what to do about God is like jumping off a diving board and trying to put off actually entering the water.”

Ortberg adds this: “Theologian Lesslie Newbigin writes that we live in an age that favors doubt over faith. We often speak of “blind faith” and “honest doubt.” Both faith and doubt can be honest or blind, but we rarely speak of “honest faith” or “blind doubt.” Both faith and doubt are needed, yet it is faith that is more fundamental… I must believe something before I can doubt anything. Doubt is to belief what darkness is to light, what sickness is to health. It is an absence. Sickness may be the absence of health, but health is more than the absence of sickness. So it is with doubt and faith. Doubt is a good servant but a poor master.”

Is Faith or Doubt More Rational?
It is dangerous to confuse faith or doubt with a simple assessment of probabilities. “We are not just probability calculators. We live in a burning building. It’s called a body.”

Read this quote. How would you respond? How is it logical? How is it illogical?

“I do not see how it would be possible to find a meaningful life in a meaningless universe. The only purpose that is worthy of life is something bigger than life itself. It is more than maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain for a few years on earth. The only purpose worthy of life is to be part of a grander vision – the redemption of creation, the pursuit of justice, becoming a saint.”

If it is true that faith requires us to step beyond the limits of rationality, how will that make us look and seem to the world?

Is that consistent with what Scripture tells us life will be like if we walk by faith?

But we still have doubts – there remain mysteries, things we don’t understand, areas we struggle with – how do we “welcome” these doubts and learn from them, even amidst our other areas of more mature faith?

You Are Launched…
The philosopher William James coined the term “forced decisions” for those situations where we simply cannot abstain. Blaise Pascal, acknowledging this idea, spoke of faith as a “wager”. In his image, you have to pick – i.e. not placing a bet isn’t allowed here so will you pick odd or even, red or black, yes to God or no. Evidence alone will never prove the existence of God beyond a shadow of a doubt. But you, as a living creature, must choose to live as God’s own or to refuse to acknowledge his Lordship.
Harvard philosopher Robert Nozick offers this modern, secular version of Pascal’s wager: “First, imagine what form of immortality would be best; then live your life as though it were true.”

“What would it look like to live a life that wagers a yes to the existence and sovereignty of God? What would a life look like that “bets” against that possibility?

“Maybe, as hard as it is to bet on faith, it is even harder to bet on doubt.” What does this statement mean to you? Do you agree?

How do you “wager” yes? What does this look like in a real, human life – yours?

Flying and Catching…
Pull up in your mind the image of a circus act, the trapeze artists. Who do we all marvel at? The flyers. Who is pretty much invisible? The Catchers. But that isn’t how the flyers feel! Henri Nouwen spent some time in the last year of his life with a group called “The Flying Rodleighs.” He learned a lot about both the flyers and the catchers.

Ortberg describes what Nouwen learned like this:

“Letting go is always an act of trust. Rodleigh told Nouwen, ‘As a flyer, I must have complete trust in my catcher. The public might think I’m the star of the trapeze, but the real star is Joe, my catcher. He has to be there for me with split-second precision and grab me out of the air as I come to him in the long jump… The secret is that the flyer does nothing. The catcher does everything. When I fly to Joe, I have simply to stretch out my arms and hands and wait. … A flyer must fly and a catcher must catch. The flyer must trust with outstretched arms that his catcher will be there waiting for him.’”

Who are you trusting to catch you? Or, are you trying to be a catcher yourself when the only role available to you is to fly? Where do you see yourself in this image?

Have you “flown” – let go of the trapeze, trusting and hoping that the catcher is worthy of your confidence? When? What did you learn from it?

What does Scripture tell us about today’s topics?

_Sometimes the mind is not our friend in questions of faith. Logic will not always lead us to the loving and life-giving choice._

Jesus said, “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure.” (Matthew 11:25-26)
Neutrality is not always a choice and even when it is it may not be the best choice.

No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. (Matthew 6:24a)

Simply let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one. (Matthew 5:37)

These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God’s creation. I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm – neither hot nor cold – I am about to spit you out of my mouth. (Revelation 3:14-16)

In a life of faith you must choose who to “fly to” and your actions will demonstrate your choice.

Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action is dead. (James 2:17)

The King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’
Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we [do these things]? The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’ (Matthew 25:34-40)

Ortberg closes like this: “We are all going to have to let go. But we get to choose to whom we jump. We get to choose – not our level of certainty – but the convictions to which we commit.”

How are you choosing, today? Who will be your catcher? Is that individual worthy of your trust? Where are you not yet willing to let go of the trapeze and fly?