

I have a number of friends who say they don't believe in God or are waiting to be convinced of the existence of God. Many of these self-identified atheists or agnostics, grew up in churches. When they share their spiritual journeys with me, I hear the same story again and again. When they reached the point where they took their faith seriously enough to begin looking for truth, to study and ask questions, they were told to stop. They were told to JUST believe!

This has created a rather ironic problem for many of them -- they are no longer Christ seekers, they no longer believe in God because the Church insisted, demanded they believe. And not just believe, but believe without questioning!

The Church emphasizes believing the "right" things. Ask most people what it means to be a Christian and you'll typically get some version of "believe Jesus died for your sins." If you ask them for more (or to elaborate) you might get things like "believe in the Trinity" or "believe in the Virgin Birth" or "believe in the Second Coming." But isn't there more to it? What about doing the right things.

We know Christians are supposed to be loving and peacemaking and kind and generous but those don't *make us* Christian. Lots of people are loving and kind and they're not Christian.

So we tend to focus on beliefs. But, as many of my atheist and agnostic friends can attest, in fact, as many of my *Christian* friends can attest, we can focus so much on belief that it becomes all that matters. We've all met Christians who believe all the right things but are pretty terrible people. People who can check all the right belief boxes but are selfish, cruel or uncaring.

There's a middle ground. Belief matters. It really does. But beliefs that don't transform us, change us to be more like Jesus (or better reflect God's image) aren't good for us - the Bible actually calls them worthless. Today, we'll see that beliefs only matter when they shape our behaviors. Belief only matters when it makes a difference in how we live. Belief only matters when you can *see* it.

This is the first week of our summer series. It's called Believe, and we're going to explore the Apostles' Creed, which is one of the early statements of faith crafted by the Church. Even today, Churches all over the world say the Apostles' Creed every week in worship as an affirmation (and reminder?) of what makes us the Church. The Creed is a series of belief statements:

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.
I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit
and born of the virgin Mary.
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to hell.
The third day he rose again from the dead.

He ascended to heaven
and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty.
From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.

For some of you in here, hearing the Creed read took you back to some painful places. Maybe you grew up in a Church that said the Creed every week and it was one of those places that told you there wasn't room for your questions. They pointed to the Creed and said, "Just believe!"

For others of us, the Creed smacks of ritual, of brainwashing. Churches tell people just to repeat it each week whether they understand it or not.

If that's where you are, I get it. But we'll see today that the Creed was never meant to silence us. Rather, the Creed was meant to help us learn to live out the life of Jesus in our own lives. The Creed (and others like it) was written in the early days of the Church, when we were still figuring out what books were part of the Bible and exactly what it meant that Jesus is raised from the dead and ascended to the throne of Heaven, proving he is God.

The Creed acts sort of like a charter, explaining who we are as a Church - and not just our Church, Catalyst. The Creed marks out who's part of the universal church (which is what lower-case C 'catholic' means). By affirming the Creed, we stand together with other Christians across denominational lines, around the world and throughout time.

One of the main reasons we struggle with the Creed (and with belief in general) is that we *start* with belief. We treat the Creed as a sort of litmus test. You can't get in unless you believe all this stuff. So there is a Belief police at the door checking everyone's credentials.

And if we're honest, there are parts of the Creed that many of us struggle with or find hard to understand. If Belief is where faith *begins*, then many of us feel disqualified from the start.

This morning we are going to look at a couple of Scriptures that suggest maybe this Belief-first mindset we have isn't sufficient (or enough).

[Scripture Slide 1] Turn with me to James 2. This book was originally a letter or sermon written by Jesus' half-brother James, who was a leader in the early Church. The congregation receiving this message was struggling with relationships -- they weren't sure how they could live, work, or serve God together because they saw themselves as very different from one another. Some were very rich while others

were very poor. Rather than treating everyone the same, the church was playing favorites, catering to the wealthy.

In this section of the letter, James is chastising them because their right beliefs aren't accompanied by right behavior. He's taking them to task because he can't see the difference their belief makes in their everyday lives. Let's begin in v 14:

What good is it, dear brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but don't show it by your actions? Can that kind of faith save anyone? Suppose you see a brother or sister who has no food or clothing, and you say, "Good-bye and have a good day; stay warm and eat well"—but then you don't give that person any food or clothing. What good does that do?

So you see, faith by itself isn't enough. Unless it produces good deeds, it is dead and useless.

Now someone may argue, "Some people have faith; others have good deeds." But I say, "How can you show me your faith if you don't have good deeds? I will show you my faith by my good deeds."

You say you have faith, for you believe that there is one God. Good for you! Even the demons believe this, and they tremble in terror. How foolish! Can't you see that faith without good deeds is useless? -- James 2:14-20

Faith by itself isn't enough. Without good deeds, without right behavior, it's *dead and useless*. James says we can't separate faith and deeds, belief and behavior. He says the only way to show our beliefs is through our behavior.

In other words, belief only matters if we can see it.

And I have to say, I *love* his final argument. He points out that even demons have right beliefs. They understand who God is and how God works better than any of us. So if all you do is believe the right things, if that right belief doesn't produce right behavior in your life, then you're no better off than a demon!

Ouch!

But then again, that explains some church people...

Here's why I find a lot of comfort in James' words: if following Jesus were all about believing the right things, I am pretty sure no one would ever be saved. Who in human history can say they believed all the right things about God? Who can say they fully understand what it means that Jesus became human, was born of a virgin? Who can say they understand perfectly what happened on the Cross, or how the Spirit empowers us in the world today?

Belief is messy. Faith is complicated. And if we had to ace the exam to make it in, none of us would.

So thank God the essence of faith isn't belief.

Of course James doesn't say that belief doesn't matter. But his words hint at a more complex understanding of the relationship between belief and behavior. For James, belief doesn't have to come first - we don't have to have all the right answers to enter into a relationship with God. God will actually *help* us if we simply begin to follow him.

[Scripture Slide 2] Turn over to Mark 9. Jesus has encountered a man whose son is possessed by a demon. Jesus is going to insist to the man that his belief factors into his son's fate. Listen to their conversation about belief:

When the evil spirit saw Jesus, it threw the child into a violent convulsion, and he fell to the ground, writhing and foaming at the mouth.

"How long has this been happening?" Jesus asked the boy's father. He replied, "Since he was a little boy. The spirit often throws him into the fire or into water, trying to kill him. Have mercy on us and help us, if you can."

"What do you mean, 'If I can'?" Jesus asked. "Anything is possible if a person believes."

The father instantly cried out, "I do believe, but help me overcome my unbelief!"

When Jesus saw that the crowd of onlookers was growing, he rebuked the evil spirit. "Listen, you spirit that makes this boy unable to hear and speak," he said. "I command you to come out of this child and never enter him again!"

Then the spirit screamed and threw the boy into another violent convulsion and left him. The boy appeared to be dead. A murmur ran through the crowd as people said, "He's dead." But Jesus took him by the hand and helped him to his feet, and he stood up. -- Mark 9:20-27

Jesus does what Jesus does - he casts the demon out. But it's the father's plea that gives me hope. Jesus tells him all he has to do is believe, and the man says, "I believe! Help my unbelief!"

I believe! Help my unbelief.

He's saying, I'm sort of there, but I need your help to get the rest of the way there. And Jesus helps him.

Belief is ahead of us. We don't have to have perfect beliefs for God to love us, to work in our lives. We don't have to have perfect beliefs to be part of the Church.

The Church has more than enough room for our questions and doubts, because God is walking beside us in our doubts, our questions and our beliefs, helping us to grow and become more complete.

This is why the Church matters too. The best part of this whole belief problem is that we don't do it alone. The Church - not just Catalyst, but the whole church all around the world and throughout time - believes *with us*.

When we say the Creed together, we're not outlining entry requirements. We're stating our goal. This is where we're going. This is who we are when we're at our best. And we're a room full of people with doubts and questions and confusion but we believe *together* and even in this we're not alone because God is with us helping us believe.

God is helping us believe not in a way that is dusty, dry and judgmental. God is shaping our beliefs in a way that transforms us, that produces a living, vibrant faith.

So over the summer, we're going to work through the Apostles' Creed. We'll explore how these beliefs shape our behavior. And we'll see why these beliefs are important to who Catalyst is as a church.

As individuals, we bring our beliefs, our doubts, our questions with us to worship. We offer them to God and say, "I believe! Help my unbelief!" And together, we affirm what we believe, where our faith journey is taking us. Most importantly, we celebrate how that belief is transforming us, making us into a people that is more and more and more like Jesus. We celebrate that our beliefs are not dusty and irrelevant barriers to faith, but an invitation from the living God to us to vibrant, flourishing life.

Friends, this journey of faith isn't one I can do on my own. It's not one you can do on your own either. We need each other, to lift us up when we're struggling, to believe with us when we are struggling. And the good news is that God is with us. God is helping us to believe.

Communion + Creed

[Communion Slide] That's why we approach the communion table today. In the midst of our doubts and questions, we act. We follow Jesus to this table he shared with his followers the night before he was killed...

...This table is how God helps us. We approach confessing, "I believe! Help my unbelief!" We receive welcome and transformation. We leave not as individuals, but as the Church, part of God's people, sent into the world as God's ambassadors...

Before we approach the table today, we're going to say the Creed together. The creed is a goal, not our starting point. These are things we want to believe, things that have proven true to Christians over thousands of years, and so we trust that enough to take it seriously and wrestle with it for ourselves.

I believe in God, the Father almighty,

creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,

who was conceived by the Holy Spirit

and born of the virgin Mary.

He suffered under Pontius Pilate,

was crucified, died, and was buried;

he descended to hell.

The third day he rose again from the dead.

He ascended to heaven

and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty.

From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,

the holy catholic church,

the communion of saints,

the forgiveness of sins,

the resurrection of the body,

and the life everlasting. Amen.

Assignment + Blessing

Where do we begin? James says behavior matters. So even if you're not sure about all this creed stuff, even if you're not sure about this whole God thing, you can still *do* something.

In the next section of his message, James gives some specific instructions regarding how we speak to each other. This week, spend a few days reading and rereading James 3:1-12 (grab a Spiritual Practices guide for some help on reading Scripture if you've never done it or struggled with it).

If you focus on this one thing: how you speak about others, God will shape your beliefs in surprising ways. You will find that your behaviors and your beliefs come closer and closer into alignment. That's because the same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead is alive and at work in you.