

*Is it I, Lord?*  
Matthew 26:20-22, 31-15

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Should we *believe* in ourselves or *doubt* ourselves? Our culture is definitely tilted toward self-confidence. If you look in a bookstore or on the web you will find lots of resources to help you gain self-confidence, but darn few that promise to help you doubt yourself. Becca and I tried to teach our children to believe in themselves—in their worth as persons, in their abilities, and in their convictions. But is there a time when *doubting* yourself might be wiser, when the act of doubting what you know about yourself might lead to real wisdom?

Over the course of my life I've had periods of self-doubt and periods of self-confidence, even bravado. In the 6<sup>th</sup> grade I had what I told my parents was an inferiority complex. I must have heard of that on TV. The whole family system was depressed at that time. We came back from Japan on a medical leave so my Mom could get psychotherapy, and we were living on a small salary in a small apartment in Dallas. My Dad was trying to finish doctoral work. I was fat and unathletic. I yelled at my parents one time, "You know why I have an inferiority complex? Because I *am* inferior!" In other words, "Nobody likes me, everybody hates me, I think I'll go eat worms." That's one extreme.

On the other hand, there have been more times in my life when I've been prone to grandiosity. In schools where tests are very important it's easy to accept as an actual fact that you are the smartest person in the room. No, you are a good test taker, not the king of the world. Before my sophomore year in high school I wrote out a plan for getting elected as student body president—complete with what alliances I needed to form to do so—and then a plan for getting elected to Congress no later than age 30, with a shot at President by 40. As it turned out, I got kicked out of school in my junior year and prohibited from running for office when I was allowed back in school. That only humbled me briefly, though. If you look at my senior yearbook, you'll see me posing in a Superman costume.

As I've grown older it has seemed to me that unbridled self-confidence is what the Greeks called hubris and what the Bible calls sin. One of the skills that leads to wisdom is self-doubt. Even Oliver Cromwell, the British leader who executed the king and sought to impose Puritan values, famously wrote to the Church of Scotland in 1650, "I beseech you in the bowels of Christ, think it possible that *you may be mistaken*."

The season of Lent is designed to be a season of repentance, but repentance has to begin with considering the possibility that we may be mistaken. We may have been wrong in our assumptions. We may have been wrong in our estimate of ourselves.

Those issues emerge in the drama that Matthew portrays of the night when Jesus was betrayed. It's Thursday night and Jesus has gathered with his twelve closest disciples for a celebration of a Passover Seder. It's a joyous occasion, a remembrance of what God did in freeing the Hebrew slaves from Egypt, and how God made us his people. But it's been a tense week. It started with a kind of inauguration parade for Jesus when people acclaimed him as a new king, but immediately there was conflict: turning tables over in the temple, in-your-face denunciations of the Pharisees, arguments over taxes (nothing is new), talk about the Temple being torn down, and Jesus telling his friends that he was going to be crucified. Still, in the

atmosphere of the holiday dinner on Thursday night, it came as a shock when Jesus said “One of you will betray me.”

Matthew says that the disciples were very sorrowful or distressed. They were not only distressed that Jesus would be betrayed, but that he would be betrayed by one of them. They were a tight group. They were a team. How could this happen? But they had learned that Jesus had a way of knowing things they did not. But the really scary thing was that it could be any one of them. They looked around at one another, and then they looked in their own hearts. One by one, the disciples asked Jesus, “Is it I, Lord? Am I the one who will betray you?” They asked it in a form that expects a negative answer—“It’s not me, is it?”—but there is uncertainty. There is self-doubt.

As early as the third century, the Bible scholar Origen noted that each of the disciples knew from what Jesus had taught them that human nature is unstable and vulnerable to being turned toward sin. They could not know what they might do in the future. Jesus had taught them to pray “Do not bring us to hard testing and deliver us from the evil one.” In this moment of shock at what Jesus predicted, it occurred to each one that he might fail in a hard test—when the sword was put to his neck, when he was whipped and a confession demanded, who could say what he might do?

Perhaps they felt exposed at the moment Jesus said that one of them would betray him. They had been scared by the opposition, but they thought they had hidden it. Somewhere deep down they had wondered if there was a way out of this situation. If Jesus was going down, could they save their own skin and go back to a normal life with their families? So when Jesus said this, they felt found out. He had seen into their hearts. They wanted it not to be true; they wanted to be brave and loyal; but they could not be sure of their own motives. So they asked, “Is it I, Lord?” I hope it’s not me, Lord, but I’m not sure if I know my own heart.

I think the disciples are learning something in that moment. Jesus’ prediction calls for some self-evaluation. It calls for some Lenten questioning. It calls for self-doubt. One psychologist [Cranston, 1994] framed the questions involved in learning about yourself in this sequence: “What do I believe about myself? How have I come to have this perspective of myself? Why should I question this perception?” The disciples are at the point of possible transformation. Maybe there is something deep in me that I don’t understand, something that needs to change.

A professor at Teachers’ College of Columbia University, Jack Mezirow, developed a model of what he called transformative learning. All such learning begins, he said, with a disorienting dilemma. The situation and the choices before you are not what you expected and they raise questions about who you are. The next step in learning, he said, is self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame. Then there is a critical assessment of your assumptions. The fourth step is “recognition that one’s discontent and process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change.” The next six steps involve finding new roles and actions, making plans, trying out roles, and integrating new assumptions into your life [summary by Taylor, 1998].

That’s the kind of learning Jesus is all about. That’s what some would call conversion. But it’s not easy. It wasn’t easy for the disciples, as the story in Matthew shows.

After the dinner, when the tension has been somewhat relieved because Judas has been identified as the betrayer—so the rest of us are off the hook—Jesus takes them up a hillside outside Jerusalem to the Mount of Olives. There he says to them, “You will *all* fall away because of me tonight. You will all desert me.” Notice what happens next. The disciples do not have it in

them to consider a hard question again. They do not ask, “You don’t mean that *I’ll* desert you, do you? Surely *I’m* not one who will fall away?”

No, this time, their choice is not self-doubt but self-confidence. They follow the lead of Peter, the Rock, who leads with bravado. “I don’t care if all the rest of them desert you, *I* will never desert you!” I will never fall away. Jesus looks him in the face and says, “Peter, I’m telling you the truth: this very night, before the morning, you will deny me three times.” In Peter’s mind, there is no chance that Jesus is right. He can’t cope with that possibility. All he can do is deny that he will deny. “Even if I have to die with you, I will never deny you!” And catch this: “All the disciples said the same.”

After that moment of doubt around the table, we have recovered. Ego strength has been restored. We are all right. My Mama loved me like a rock. I got my self-esteem and I know who I am. I am a man of my word. I will never fall away. I am who I think I am: loyal and courageous. Don’t tell me otherwise.

But here’s the truth: Jesus was right. They all did fall away. They deserted him when he was arrested. Maybe they did it with good reason, but they chose not to stand with him.

What are we capable of doing? Are we capable of denying Christ?

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Christians thought that the kingdom of God was about to be fulfilled on earth by the improvement of human beings into creatures of peace and justice. That confidence was profoundly shaken by the Great War in which humans lay in trenches and shot at each other for months without end. But even more troubling were the events of the Holocaust in which the most highly educated nation on earth rationally decided to eliminate six million of its citizens because of ethnicity or other difference. You know what’s really scary about the Holocaust? It’s not that monsters roamed the earth in that period. It’s that good people like you and me, church people, solid citizens, middle class people, went along with a plan to improve the economy by destroying a whole class of people they didn’t much care for.

We don’t really know what we are capable of until we come to hard testing—until the devil offers us something we really want.

When we took our wedding vows, we didn’t think we would be capable of walking away from that relationship, but we did. When we took the job, we didn’t think we would be capable of jumping to a competitor, but we did. When we first professed our faith in Christ, we didn’t think that we would ever keep our mouths shut because we were afraid of being considered too religious, but we did. When we were baptized and committed to church membership, we didn’t think that one day we would choose other institutions as more worthy of our time and energy than the church, but we did.

The tradition of Lent intends to push us to ask the question of ourselves, “Is it I, Lord? Am I capable of betraying you? Have I already fallen away?” Lent is a season for self-doubt, not self-confidence, because unless we begin to doubt the image we have constructed of ourselves we will never begin to approach repentance and forgiveness.

A few years ago my deacons, with my nudging, began to think about spiritual growth. How could we foster spiritual growth among the deacons themselves? I met with a well-respected pastoral counselor and spiritual director in our state to discuss whether we might hire him to assist in our process. He asked me, “What do you mean by spiritual growth?”

“Well,” I said, thinking out loud, “I guess I mean coming to see your life in relation to God’s purposes and becoming self-critical.”

“You might as well give up on that,” he said immediately. “Most people don’t have the capacity to be self-critical. That’s not going to happen.”

I hope he was wrong.

I think of the Apostle Paul, once so sure of himself that he was rounding up followers of The Way as heretics, later said that he was the chief of sinners and that his life was now about the goal of knowing Christ—something he had not achieved yet, but a goal toward which he pressed. He told the Corinthians to examine themselves when they came to that supper that remembers the night when Jesus was betrayed. In that same letter (1 Corinthians 10:12) Paul said, “So if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall.” In other words, doubt yourself a little. I like the way Eugene Peterson expanded that verse in *The Message*:

“Don’t be so naïve and self-confident. You’re not exempt. You could fall flat on your face as likely as anyone else. Forget about self-confidence; it’s useless. Cultivate God-confidence.”

This Lent, I beseech you, by the bowels of Christ, that you try a little self-doubt. Let our prayer be, “Is it I, Lord?”