



MAIN POINT

God calls us to test our faith so that we might use it to strengthen and encourage others.

THINKING THINGS THROUGH

Connect the sermon to the study.

- 1. If you feel comfortable sharing, have you or anyone close to you ever gone through a season of doubt? What do you think were the motivating factors behind that season of doubt?**
- 2. How did you respond to that season? Did you seek out help or did you try to handle it on your own? Why?**

Leader: As sinners saved by grace, we should not be surprised by seasons of doubt. While we are God's children by faith, we still have a sin nature that has not and will not be done away with this side of eternity. Thankfully, however, God has not left us on our own to deal with our doubts. He has given us His Holy Spirit to empower us to face our doubts head on and the church, the body of Christ, to support and encourage us in the process of overcoming our doubts.

DIGGING DEEPER

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

> HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ 2 CORINTHIANS 13:5-10.

- 3. What do you think Paul meant when he told the Corinthians to "test yourselves" (v. 5)?**

Leader: In the original language, the verb in this verse is present tense. Paul was not telling the Corinthians to test themselves once, but to keep on testing and keep on examining.

- 4. Why might believers need to examine themselves time and time again? What good might come from this kind of examination?**
- 5. Is it possible that this kind of examination be taken too far? Why or why not?**

Leader: We can trust the Lord to tell us the truth, just as the Corinthians could. As we examine ourselves, we are opening up our lives for the correction of God to be freely given. We are asking Him to show us areas of our lives in which we are unfaithful or in which we are deceiving ourselves. This self-examination is part of growing into

maturity (v. 9). However, the Lord also wants us to live with a sense of confidence and assurance each time we examine ourselves. God does not want us to live in a constant state of panic about whether or not we are saved. The real test of the genuineness of the Corinthians' faith would come in how they responded to Paul's letter, which challenged them to repent and deepen their trust in Christ. If you are concerned about the sin in your life, that is actually a good sign; it demonstrates that you have a repentant heart and recognize your need for Christ.

There is no multiple choice test we can take to determine whether we are truly saved, and that was not Paul's goal in challenging the church to "examine" themselves. Paul's goal in challenging the church to test themselves was to strengthen their resolve to trust Christ so that they might be equipped to help others overcome their doubts and deepen their trust in the Lord.

> **HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ JUDE 1:20-23.**

6. How would you go about keeping yourself in God's love as Jude commands here (see also John 14:21)? What is the connection between experiencing God's love and being obedient to Him? What happens when you try to have one without the other?

Leader: We keep ourselves in God's love by being obedient to Him (John 14:21). This doesn't mean that we can earn God's love. His love is unmerited and unconditional. But we experience God's love more fully when we walk in obedience to Him. In John 15, Jesus used the analogy of the vine and the branches to illustrate that our spiritual growth is dependent upon how connected we are to Jesus. When we abide in Him, we bear fruit, meaning our lives give evidence to God's love and grace and point other people to Him.

7. According to these verses how does God intend for us to combat our doubts? How are we to help our brothers and sisters in Christ address their doubts?

8. Should the level of others' doubts change the way we respond to them? Why or why not?

Leader: God calls us to "be merciful to those who doubt." In other words, we are to respond to the doubts of fellow believers with compassion. When other believers share doubts about particular doctrines, we should patiently help them find the answers to their questions. For those who are struggling with sin, we should lovingly help them think through the steps they need to take in order to repent of that sin and live in obedience to Christ. Jude challenged his readers to show mercy while "hating even the garment stained by corrupted flesh" in order to make clear that we should never show mercy to those who are struggling in a manner that affirms their sin. If we truly love our brothers and sisters in Christ who are struggling, we will lovingly help them turn away from the sin they are in. Still others whose doubts are deeper, we should "snatch from the fire," reaching out to them with urgent love and concern.

9. What are some practical ways we might "be merciful to those who doubt"? What could we do to ensure that our church is a safe place for people to voice their doubts and struggles?

10. What do you need from the church and from our group in order to feel comfortable sharing your doubts and struggles?

SERMON BASED GROWTH GROUP

Leader: There is a great temptation in church to pretend we have it altogether. Such behavior, however is not only dishonest but also discourages others from honestly sharing their doubts and struggles. Instead of pretending to be something that we are not, we should strive to constantly acknowledge that we are poor in spirit and in desperate need of God's grace.

DOING LIFE TOGETHER

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

- 11. What happens when you keep your doubts and struggles to yourself? How might doing so hinder your walk with Christ?**

- 12. What can we do to cultivate an environment in our growth group, in this new year, where it is safe to share doubts and struggles?**

- 13. Who in your life could you learn from in terms of dealing with doubt? What have you learned in your walk with Christ about overcoming doubts that you could share with others?**

PRAYER

Thank God for loving us in the face of our doubts and struggles. Pray God would help us to rely on Him to help us overcome our doubts. Pray also that we would learn both to seek out brothers and sisters in the church to help us bear our burdens and that we would actively seek to help others bear theirs.

FOLLOW UP

Midway through this week, send a follow-up email to your group with some or all of the following:

- Questions to consider as they continue to reflect on what they learned this week:
 - **Do you have a mentor or close friend you regularly share your doubts and struggles with? If not, take some time to think and pray about who in your growth group or the church at large could fill that role in your life.**
 - **Is there anyone around you who is struggling with doubts? What is one thing you could do for them to encourage and support them this week?**
- A note of encouragement, following up on any specific prayer requests mentioned during your group gathering.
- The challenge to memorize 2 Corinthians 13:5.

SPOTLIGHT ON THE PASSAGE

1 CORINTHIANS 13:5-10

13:5. Paul wanted the Corinthians to take his third visit so seriously that he challenged them to examine and test themselves to see whether they were in the faith. To encourage them further toward self-examination, Paul asked if they did not realize that Christ Jesus was in them. Christ's Spirit at work in the believer has certain effects of sanctification and faithfulness. If the Corinthians' claims to faith were true, they were united to Christ, and the Holy Spirit was making the truth of their claims evident in their lives. But if the life of any believer showed no signs of the Spirit's activity, then the Spirit was not working in him and Christ was not indwelling him. Paul had already mentioned that the Corinthians were being tested. Their response to his instructions would prove whether their faith was genuine.

13:6. Anticipating his opponents' objection, Paul assured the Corinthians that they would discover that Paul and his company had not failed the test. Paul evidently expected some people within the church to question his own Christian living. In response, he admitted that even he needed to continue demonstrating saving faith in Christ, just as the Old Testament patriarchs had to demonstrate their faith through testing.

13:7-8. The apostle's primary desire was not that the Corinthians would vindicate his reputation, but that they would do what was right even though in the eyes of his opponents he might seem to have failed. From the perspective of human wisdom so deeply cherished by many Corinthians, Paul was not very impressive, and perhaps would appear to have failed. He exhorted the church to conform to his instructions, despite what others said about him, so they might do what was right and pleasing to God. Paul stated that he and his company could not do anything against the truth. He was confident that he and his company were true believers, and therefore that they could not actually fail the test, despite what others might conclude.

13:9. Paul's ministry to the Corinthian church proved that he was not interested in preserving his reputation for his own sake. His company was likewise not interested in their own reputations. Rather, they were all glad when they appeared weak and the Corinthians strong. Their central prayer for the church at Corinth was that God would bring them to perfection or completion. Paul's desire was that the Corinthians would come to maturity in their service to Christ.

13:10. Paul summarized his motivations in yet another way. He wrote these things when he was absent so that when he arrived he might not have to be harsh. His harshness was intended to render unnecessary any harsh use of authority when he visited. Paul had the power and authority, given to him by the Lord, to inflict much trouble on the church in discipline. But he knew that discipline was not the central purpose of his authority. The Lord had given Paul this authority for building ... up, not for tearing ... down. Insofar as discipline served to build up the church, Paul was willing to inflict it when necessary. His primary desire, however, was to build up the church through positive means. He felt the best way to build up the church was to exhort them to repent and to discipline them only if his words failed to bring about change. Paul preferred a gentle touch, but he was ready to do whatever was necessary to rescue them from sin.

JUDE 1:20-23

1:20. Jude had dealt with the dangerous situation of his readers due to the presence of false teachers (vv. 4-19). At this point he outlined how believers could contend for the faith, a subject he had introduced earlier (v. 3). These instructions concern faith, prayer, love, and hope. First, Jude wanted these Christians to build themselves up in their most holy faith. This most holy faith is the Christian revelation, handed down by the apostles (see v. 3). One way Christians build up this faith is by studying the Scriptures. This faith is most holy because it is unique and entirely set apart from all other religious systems. Second, Jude wanted believers to pray in the Holy Spirit. Such prayer involves being guided by the Spirit who intercedes for believers (Rom. 8:26-27).

1:21. Third, Jude desired his readers to keep themselves in the love of God. Continuing in God's love involves obeying His commands. Fourth, these believers should wait anxiously for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ

to eternal life. They must kindle the fire of Christian hope. Waiting does not call for passive inactivity. It calls for God's people to live holy, obedient lives. Believers experience eternal life the moment they accept Christ as Savior, but they will experience its climax and fulfillment at Christ's return.

1:22. Jude had described elements of a balanced Christian life: faith, prayer, love, and hope (vv. 20-21). The Christian life also involves service. Jude encouraged Christians both to personal spiritual growth (vv. 20-21) and to active ministry (vv. 22-23). Jude pointed his readers to three groups of people. First, he urged his readers to have mercy on some, who are doubting. The false teachers had caused some to have uncertainty about the truth of Christianity. These doubters apparently were partly convinced that the false teachings were correct. Stronger believers needed to show concern for these weaker ones whose faith was wavering lest they compromised their commitment.

1:23. Second, Jude wanted his readers to save others, snatching them out of the fire. Apparently, this second group had an even stronger leaning toward the false teachings. This group was about to fully accept such teachings and thus were in danger of divine judgment. In a spirit of humility, not superiority, believers must confront these people directly with their errors.

Finally, the third group evidently had completely accepted the heretical teachings. On this third group, Jude urged believers to have mercy with fear, hating even the garment polluted by the flesh. Garment refers to the inner clothing worn next to the skin. The phrase the garment polluted by the flesh apparently depicts an extreme degree of corruption. By his statement Jude may have meant that we should love the sinner but hate and reject the sin. True believers remain in God's love and seek to minister to those who have been influenced by deceivers. In contrast to false teachers, true believers are to devote themselves to personal spiritual growth as well as to ministry to those deceived by false teachers.