

How Do We Deconstruct Well?

I want to tell you about a woman named **Traci**. Traci is now in her late 40s. She grew up in a Christian family, albeit a very conservative one: she and her parents were at church every time the doors were open. When Traci was about twelve years old, she began to notice that while most of her friends were starting to have crushes on *boys*, she never developed those feelings. And over time, she realized that the way they felt about *boys*, she actually felt about *girls*. It took her five years, but Traci eventually worked up the courage to tell her parents about all of this. And while the conversation with them went better than she *anticipated* it would, it ended with a very definitive follow-up statement from her mom, that went like this: “Traci, thank you so much for telling us. But the most important thing to remember is that **you should never talk about this with anybody else.**”

Another guy named **Ethan** grew up in a small town in Nebraska, where a Democrat had not been elected to office in over thirty years. He and his family attended the one Baptist church in his town, and it wasn't unusual for Sundays there to feel a lot more like *campaign rallies* than *services*. The pastor would rant for 15-20 minutes some weeks about how liberals were out to ruin the country, and how “people like *that* don't *belong* in a country like *ours*.” And then that same pastor would close his sermons by having the whole congregation recite the Lord's prayer together. This past year, Ethan turned on the news to see some of the footage from what happened on January 6 at the Capitol, and did a double-take when the camera panned across the crowd to show *his* pastor, from *his* hometown church—the one who had his church recite a prayer about forgiving your enemies—holding up a homemade flag displaying the words, *Hang Mike Pence*.

There's also **Elizabeth**. Elizabeth's *husband* had been verbally and sometimes physically abusive towards her for seven straight years. She *wanted* to tell someone about it—she needed help. The only problem was that her husband had isolated her from most of her good friends, and the only outlet she really had was the church they attended together. The problem with *that* was that her husband was one of the deacons at the church—had been for a while. And on top of that, he owned an engineering firm in town and gave a large amount of money every single year to the church. So when she finally told the church leadership what was happening in her home, they said they wanted to “talk about it” and “get back to her.” When they got back to her, they had come up with a “solution.” They offered to pay for her to receive counseling for the abuse, as long as they could pay for it in cash, and as long as she promised not to move out of the house with her husband or separate from him, and as long as she promised not to tell anybody about the abuse.

And then there's **my story**. When I was in middle school, there were a few guys in my youth group that I was often encouraged to look up to. They were often held as *the model* of what it looked like to faithfully follow Jesus. One year, I rode up with those guys *late* to a summer camp our youth group attended. I met them at one of their houses to drive up. That guy's *parents* had already left for camp with the rest of the youth group, so we were all unsupervised. So before we left, the guys I was supposed to look up to invited over some of their girlfriends, cracked into their parents liquor cabinet, and encouraged me to sit in the living room and watch re-runs of *Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, while they all went into their respective rooms and hooked up with their girlfriends. And then, when they were finished, we all drove up to Christian summer camp together.

~~Oh, by the way, good morning everybody. Welcome. How are you? I'm well.~~ I wanted to start off with **those stories this morning because** all of those are stories of people who at one point in their life, decided to deconstruct their faith. And those experiences were central pieces of why they decided to do that. This morning, we are beginning a new teaching series called *Question Everything: How **Deconstructing** Your Faith Can Help You Keep It*.

Deconstruction, **if you're unfamiliar** with that term, is a bit of a phenomenon right now in the West. The *term itself* actually *originated* as an approach to *philosophy* and *literature*: it describes the process of breaking down certain writing and thinking, piece-by-piece, to analyze the validity of each component. But **in more recent years, people have applied it to faith in general, and Christianity in particular**. More and more people are choosing to *deconstruct* their faith in Jesus. *This newer* type of deconstruction is **a little trickier to define**, just because if you asked five different people to define it, you'd probably get five slightly different answers. But in the broadest and most generous sense, we might put it something like this:

Deconstruction is the process of examining and re-examining your faith, in order to decide which aspects of it to keep, and which aspects of it to reject.

That, or at least something *resembling* that, is what people mean when they say they're *deconstructing*. They're choosing to take **a raw look** at their belief system and ask difficult questions *of* it. They're asking where it *comes from*, *why* they believe it, and what the *social impacts* are of believing it. Which means it's an especially common experience among people who grew up in and around the Church, or people who have spent substantial amounts of time in that environment.

And deconstruction **tends to lead people** to a variety of different places as a result of it all. For some people, it leads to a renewed, *refocused* faith in Jesus. For others, it leads to attempts at *reinventing* what it looks like to *be* a Christian in the first place. And for others still (and *these* tend to get the most headlines and retweets), it has led to *abandoning* faith in Jesus entirely. But **whatever the outcome**, deconstruction *has* impacted and *is impacting* a lot of people in our society. One book that came out *ten years ago* found that **about 60% of people raised in Christian churches deconstruct their faith following high school**,¹ and that was really on the very *front* end of the deconstruction *movement* we're witnessing *now*. But considering that we have a large number of people here at City Church who grew up with some connection to church and church culture, it seemed like doing a series around this topic could be a helpful thing for many of us.

So chances are, there are **people** in this room right now or listening online who are **in the midst of** deconstruction themselves. Whether you would use that *word* to describe it or not, you, right now, are asking difficult questions about what you believe, why you believe it, and what the effects are of believing it. If that's you, obviously this series is designed to be helpful to you.

Others of you, on the other hand, **might not be** in that place. You're *not* currently questioning what you believe or struggling with it—and that's fine. But I would encourage *you* to pull up a seat and listen, for two primary reasons. **First, just because you aren't struggling or asking those questions now, doesn't mean you won't ever.** I've been pastoring for a while now and what I've found is that doubt and questions about our faith come for a majority of us at some point in our life. It may be in a few months, or a few years, or a few decades from now, but for most of us, that day *will come*. And it helps to be prepared for it.

But then *second*, **even if you're one of the few** for whom that day *doesn't* come, **you will almost assuredly have the opportunity to walk with someone else through a season like that.** So even if you're not listening for *you*, you are definitely listening for *others*. Maybe God has you here during this series to become a better and better *helper* to those who struggle. Maybe he has you here learning how to, in the words of the book of Jude in the New Testament, "be *merciful* to those who doubt."² Make sense? So I think they'll be something in this series for all of us, albeit in some different ways.

So if you go to **citychurchknox.com/question**, you can get a rundown of the different *questions* we're planning to tackle each week of this series. We're going to look at five

¹ From David Kinnamon's book, *You Lost Me*.

² Jude 22

big questions that, at least from *my perspective*, tend to be some of the most significant factors in people deconstructing their faith. Feel free to go there so you know where we're headed.

But what I wanted to do the majority of our time *today* is actually **talk a bit about deconstruction itself**. I think one of the problems we have right now is that most of the thinking out there *on* deconstruction tends to be fairly *polarized*. If you just do some Googling, you'll find that there are entire camps that think deconstruction is the *enemy*. That anyone who asks hard questions of the Christian faith is only out to destroy it and they're only doing that because they want to sleep with their boyfriend or girlfriend. So in *their* view, we need to view anyone who deconstructs with immediate skepticism and suspicion, or just tell them to fall in line and get over their questions. And then there are other camps that think deconstruction is something *everyone must* do. It's an unmitigated *good*. If you're not deconstructing (in their mind) you're just a blind follower and no one should listen to you anyway. That's the landscape currently.

And **as with most things** in evangelicalism, anytime there are two loud camps throwing rocks at the other, the *truth* is often **somewhere in the middle**. **The truth is that deconstruction can be a healthy thing, or it can be an unhealthy thing. It really all depends on what you're deconstructing, how you're deconstructing, and why you're deconstructing.** So that's what I want to get into today. We'll start with *what*.

If you've got a bible, go ahead and turn with me to **Matthew 5**. We've covered this passage several times before. But today I want to look at it maybe from a slightly different vantage point than before. Because in this passage, Jesus is basically laying out what he and his kingdom are all about. But by doing that, **he's also helping people understand how his kingdom and his way of life relate to the existing belief systems and religious norms of his day.** And I think that makes this a really helpful passage for how we think about something like deconstruction.

Take a look with me **starting in v. 17** of that chapter. This is Jesus speaking, and he says this:

[17] "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. [18] For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. [19] Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

Now, quick question for us: *why* would Jesus feel like he needs to start off by saying, “*do not think* that I have come to abolish the Law and the prophets”? Just go with your gut: what does that seem to *imply*? Yeah, it implies that people might be *inclined* to *think* that about him. If you and I were having a conversation and I *prefaced* something I said with “now, *don’t think* that I’m an *Alabama fan*, but...” why would I say that? Probably because I am *concerned* that what I’m *about to say* is going to make me *sound* like an Alabama fan, right? And I would *never*, in a *million years*, in my *worst nightmares*, even if I was tortured *repeatedly*, want to be perceived as...anyway, you get the point. **It’s a disclaimer, right? It’s me trying to get ahead of something incorrect you might be inclined to believe about me, based on what I’m about to say.**

Okay, I think it’s **similar here in Matthew 5**. Jesus tells people “not to *think*” that he’s coming to abolish the Old Testament commands, because he anticipates that some people might incorrectly draw that *conclusion* from what he’s about to say next. **Jesus knows that anytime you go after long-standing systems and structures and traditions (especially ones that have become enmeshed with *religion*), you’re going to encounter some resistance. You’re likely going to get *accused* of some things you’re not actually doing.**

And that is sometimes the case when it comes to deconstruction too. Sometimes, even when people set out to ask questions and deconstruct with the *noblest* of intentions, they get *accused* of the worst possible motives. **So Jesus starts by clarifying his own motives and intentions in what he’s about to do.** But then he then *proceeds* to essentially *deconstruct* some very popular, very widespread misunderstandings of what life with God looks like. He disassembles people’s notions of the Scriptures in substantial ways. If you read through the rest of Matthew 5 and 6 later, you’ll see what I mean. Now, he goes about it a number of different ways. [*What does Jesus deconstruct?*]

Sometimes in those chapters, **Jesus deconstructs people’s misapplications of the bible.** He does this specifically with people’s understanding of things like *murder* and *adultery*. He says “you’ve heard it said ‘do not commit murder’ and ‘do not commit adultery.’ So you *think* just because you haven’t committed either of those two specific acts, you’re in the clear with God.” “But I’m here to tell you that the command not to murder is *actually* about ridding your heart of the *type of anger* that would *lead* someone to murder. He says, ‘I’m here to tell you that the command not to commit adultery is *actually* about ridding your *heart* of the *type of lust* and *objectification of people* that

would *lead someone to adultery*.³ In other words, Jesus goes after their *misapplications* of the bible, and *deconstructs* those applications.

Other times, **Jesus deconstructs people's additions to the bible**. For instance, he says at one point, “okay—you have heard it said ‘love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’” But the Old Testament never said “hate your enemy,” it just said “love your neighbor.” But over the years, God’s people had *assumed that meant* that you could *hate* people who *weren’t* your neighbor. They had *added to* what God said, based on what they *assumed* that he *meant*. So Jesus deconstructs *that too*, and sets up a truer understanding of that commandment in its place: saying that they are to love *even their enemies*.⁴ Jesus deconstructs people’s *additions to the bible*.

And other times *still*, **Jesus deconstructs systems based on unbiblical ideas**. He does this in how he talks about *oaths*. He says “you guys are really focused on keeping oaths that you made and following through on them.” But I’m telling you that the whole *system* of oath-keeping is based on the *assumption* that you are sometimes going to be dishonest with people. And that’s a bad *system*. So I’m telling you: *don’t even participate in the system*. Just live honest, integrity-filled lives, in such a way that you don’t need *oaths* to differentiate between your truths and your lies.⁵ He deconstructs *systems* that have been set up based on unbiblical *ideas*.

So **Jesus spends plenty of time** doing some *deconstructing* of his own. You can call it that or not, but that’s essentially what it is. He spends plenty of time deconstructing and tearing down people’s misapplications, misinterpretations, and additions to the bible, and resetting them on what God *intended*. **Jesus is evidently under the impression that some things—even some long-standing religious traditions and systems—need to be disassembled, taken apart, and sometimes torn down entirely, when they are inconsistent with what God intended.** One of the most helpful things for *me* in my faith was when I realized that many of the things that frustrated and saddened *me* about Christianity, were also things that frustrated and saddened *Jesus* about Christianity.

And *that type of deconstruction is needed, not just then*, but continually for God’s people throughout time. It is what the Old Testament *prophets* did anytime God’s people had forgotten and misunderstood how they were to live. This is what the reformer *Martin Luther* did when he spoke out against the aspects of the Catholic church of his day that didn’t line up with the bible. It’s what *Martin Luther King Jr.* did when he encouraged people to *rediscover* the bible’s clear teachings on justice and racial

³ See Matthew 5:21-30

⁴ See Matthew 5:43-47.

⁵ See Matthew 5:33-37.

reconciliation. And we could go on with examples. But **we need people who come along, in big ways and small, and deconstruct misguided beliefs and systems, in order to return to what God intended.**

So, for example, when we teach a biblical sexual ethic in our churches in ways that offers no grace or hope to those who have failed to live up to it, there is some *deconstruction* that needs to happen there. When we have presented the message of Jesus in such a way that it has no word of challenge or rebuke to a white supremacist, there's some *deconstruction* that needs to happen there. When our churches have provided cover for abusers but no protection for the abused, there is *deconstruction* that needs to happen there.

There are many spaces within the American Church where we need to intentionally differentiate between the things the Scriptures teach, and the *misunderstandings* and *misapplications* of what the Scriptures teach. So to that type of deconstruction, as a pastor, I say "yes and amen." Let's do that, *always*. In fact, in a way, that's a big part of what we do up here on Sundays every single week. We open up the Scriptures, we read what they have to say, and then we do our best to separate out what we may *think* it means, from what it *actually* means. That's a type of *deconstruction*.

But all of this brings up our next question, which is *how* are we *deconstructing*? How are we going about it? Or, to ask it a different way, **what standard are we using for our deconstruction?** Anytime we critique something, we do so based on a standard. Otherwise, there's no way to critique. This is true, no matter what the subject matter is: if you tell me that a certain type of coffee is bad, you can only do that if there is a standard in your head for what coffee *should* taste like. Similarly, if you are going to say that something within Christianity is *wrong* or *abusive* or *oppressive*, you have to use some sort of standard for how things *should* be. So the question is, *what is* the standard you're using, and is it a *good* standard?

Notice that in Matthew 5, Jesus uses the Scriptures, and God's heart as revealed in the Scriptures, as his standard. **Good deconstruction is when we use the bible to critique the world's corruption of the Church.** It's when we go "the Church is currently doing *this*, and the bible says *that*. So we need to repent of *this*, and do *that* instead." **Bad deconstruction is when we use the world's values to critique the Church.** It's when we say "the Church is currently doing *this*, and society doesn't really like *this* right now. So let's not do this."⁶ That's bad deconstruction.

⁶ This has been tweaked a little, but it's borrowed heavily from John Mark Comer [here](#).

And when I say it's "bad" deconstruction," I don't just mean I'm a Christian pastor so I don't like it. I actually mean it's *bad*. I mean it's an *ineffective, inconsistent* way of evaluating right and wrong. The world's standards are perpetually *changing*. The things we think are good and right and true *today* are very different from what we thought in the 1950s. And *those* things are very different from the things we thought in the 1800s.

For instance, how many of you have at least one grandparent or older family member who, for the most part, is an absolutely wonderful human being. But who occasionally says something that makes you go, "yep, can't say *that*. Can't think *that*. Can't believe *that*. At least not in a public setting, you can't." I think a lot of us do. But listen: if you don't think that our grandkids are going to at some point think that about *us*, you're being naive. They *absolutely* are. And they're going to think that, not just about *traditional, religious* beliefs we hold, but because we believed things that were *popular to believe in our day*. The world's standards are perpetually changing.

So here's all I'm trying to say. Maybe it's not wise to evaluate a faith and belief system that has been around for over 2,000 years, using the standard of what our society currently does and does not like. Maybe that's not the most consistent, authoritative standard to use. Maybe if this book and this belief system have stood the test of time across eras and continents and cultures and governments, maybe it's a little more reliable than what our Western society finds acceptable this year. I'm not saying don't critique—I'm saying maybe let's use a more consistent *standard* as the *basis* for our critique. *How* we deconstruct *matters*.

To ask it a slightly different way, are we *deconstructing* or are we *demolishing*? I think when some people say they're deconstructing, it's actually a bit of a misnomer. I think they actually mean they're *demolishing*. And there's a difference. So I'm a dad of a five year old, which means that a lot of my life is consumed by *Legos*. Buying them, building them, *stepping* on them—a lot of stepping on them actually. But our son loves to get the kits of Legos where you follow a step-by-step process to build something. He's getting really good at it.

But occasionally what will happen is that he'll get one of the steps slightly wrong. He'll put the wrong piece on, or he'll put the *right* piece on, but just one row over from where it should've been, or turned the wrong way, or something like that. And when that happens, each step gets harder and harder because it gets further and further off. And sometimes he won't realize that until he's 3 or 4 or 10 steps down the road. Now what *used* to happen when he was three or four is that when stuff started not working, we would just hear a "ughhhhhh!" from the other room, and we'd come in there, and he would've

destroyed the whole thing. But now, what he's learning to do is meticulously trace the steps back to the step that was wrong, correct that *piece*, and then keep building.

Now to me, that's a helpful picture of what it means to *deconstruct* well. It's not *demolishing*; it's not taking a baseball bat to everything we believe and tearing the whole thing down. It's taking the time and the intentionality to trace our steps back to where the wrong piece got put down. To where we understood something wrong, or applied something wrong, or to where someone misrepresented to us what following Jesus is—setting that piece right, and then continuing from there. Now some of us have a few blocks we need to trace back through, and some of us have a *lot* of them. But deconstructing is always more helpful than demolishing.

I think something I did *wrong* when I was younger is that sometimes I showed up to conversations about faith with a *baseball bat*. I wanted to tear down and destroy anything that I thought looked like “traditional” faith. I wanted to call *everybody* a Pharisee and *everybody* legalistic and *everybody* self-righteous. In my head, everything was wrong and everything needed to be demolished so we could start over. And now I'm realizing that a lot of what I wanted to tear down was actually really beautiful. Sure, maybe the block got laid down sideways or a notch over from where it was supposed to be—but that doesn't mean the whole thing needs to be smashed to pieces.

There may be some things very *wrong* with the faith that was handed down to you by your parents or your grandparents or your pastor or your youth pastor—there may be things that need to be deconstructed. But that doesn't mean the whole thing needs to be tossed out. The church I grew up in had a lot *wrong* with it, to be sure. But without some of the people I met and the way they followed Jesus, I likely would've walked away from the faith and never come back. Part of growing up is realizing that not everything needs to be demolished—some things just need to be deconstructed.

And that brings us to our *last question*, and that's **why are we deconstructing?** I think we have to acknowledge that part of the reason so many of us are inclined to *demolish* is because we are doing so out of a place of *hurt*. That's the elephant in the room when it comes to this whole deconstruction conversation, isn't it? A lot of us have been *wounded*—in big ways and small—by the Church, and church *leadership*, and even just other self-proclaimed Christians. **And even if that hasn't happened to us, it's often happened to people we love.** And often—not *always*, but *often*—that is what sets us on a trajectory towards deconstruction.

And listen: I have no intention of downplaying those experiences. I've been around church and the church world for a lot of years. I've seen *first-hand* the damage and harm

that church people are capable of inflicting. The Church has often been guilty of some very real, very visceral *harm*—we’re going to spend a whole week talking about that in this series. In fact, I know that for many of you who are here at City Church, part of what we’ve done is try to walk *with* you and be helpful *to* you as you reel and process and heal from a lot of that.

And I **can understand how** those experiences would make a person want to do some “demolishing.” I mean that’s what we do as human beings when we’re hurt, right? We instinctively want to tear down and destroy anything *connected* to the thing that hurt us. That is a very understandable response. But if you’re in that place right now, and you would allow me to just offer a word of personal counsel to you—not even as a pastor, just as a fellow human being—it would be this: **dismissing or attacking Christianity won’t make the hurt go away.** Now, I’m not saying it doesn’t *feel good to do*—I’m just saying it doesn’t *help us heal*. I’m saying it doesn’t help us make any *progress*. You see, hurt is *relational*, not *conceptual*. *Tearing down the concept of Christianity won’t heal the wound caused by Christians, any more than tearing down the concept of fatherhood will heal the wound caused by your father.* Because hurt isn’t *conceptual*, it’s *relational*.

And so often, **what ends up happening** is that when we start demolishing out of a place of pain, *we just start swinging the bat at anything and everything connected to what hurt us*—and what we sometimes forget is that there are *people* there that we’re swinging at too. *As the old counseling adage goes, “hurt people hurt people.”* When we are hurt, and don’t heal from that hurt, we usually end up hurting others. But that leaves us asking, **where do we take our hurt?** What do we *do with* it that is healthier and more productive than using it to *demolish*?

Well **my take** is that we bring our hurt to Jesus. And that’s not a cop-out—there’s a *reason* I say that. I don’t know if we normally **think about it this way**, but **no one has experienced as much hurt from religious people as Jesus did.** It was the religious establishment that harassed and critiqued Jesus nearly every day of his life. It was their misinterpretations and misuses of the bible that they used to stoke anger and fear and hatred and suspicion towards him. And it was them who quite literally handed him over to the authorities to be executed. It was their man-made additions to the bible that they used to rig up fake charges against him so that he could be tortured and killed in one of the worst ways imaginable.

No one has experienced as much hypocrisy from Christians as Jesus has. He sees through every lie, and he sees past every facade. He knows every secret, and sees the gap between who people pretend to be and who they are. **No one has been let down by Christians more than Jesus has.** *On the most difficult night of his life, when all he*

needed were for his best friends to stay up and pray for him, they fell asleep. A guy he poured into for three years *betrayed* him. One of his closest friends denied knowing him three times. As much horrible stuff in the Church as you and I might have seen, none of us have seen the amount of stuff Jesus has.

And do you know what's crazy? Given all of that, Jesus still thinks *he* is the hope of the world, he thinks his *way of life* is the only way to live, and he still thinks his Church can be his representatives to a broken world. Francis Collins puts it this way:

The pure, clean water of spiritual truth is placed in rusty containers (i.e. flawed human beings), and the subsequent failings of the church down through the centuries should not be projected onto the faith itself, as if the water had been the problem.

Some of what you and I have seen portrayed as Christianity in our lives might indeed be ugly and unjust and broken and harmful—I don't doubt that one bit. **But it might just be that those are problems with the “containers,” not the water.** And the answer might just be learning to differentiate the two, rather than thinking they're both the problem.

So that's what we're going to do during this series. We're going to dig into some of the biggest questions people have about what Christianity has become. We're going to try and learn to differentiate between the rusty containers and the water itself. We're going to talk through some things that Christians need to repent of, and some things that they honestly *don't*. And we're going to truly question *everything*, including many of the questions themselves.

But as we conclude, I just want to make two requests of two different groups of people in this room. First, to those of you here who are more inclined to look at people who deconstruct with *skepticism and suspicion*. If you hear someone asking hard questions or critiquing aspects of Christianity and your response is to get defensive or angry or frustrated, I would ask that you reconsider that posture. I would ask that you not write someone off simply because they are tearing stuff down, just like I would *hope* we wouldn't have written *Jesus* off just because he *seemed* like he was tearing stuff down. Instead, I would ask that you *listen*. That you would be willing to try and *understand* the critiques before *arguing* with them. And that we might be willing to consider that *if there is a critique*, it just might be that there is *something* there worth critiquing, even if the critique is poorly presented or coming from a place of anger and hurt.

And if you are in the room and are more inclined towards *critiquing* Christianity, I would ask this of you. Would you be willing to consider that maybe the problem is with the

containers, and not the water? Would you be willing to explore if maybe the problem is not with the message of Christianity itself, but rather in the imperfect containers that carry it? *Would you be willing to consider that all of us are broken people, doing our best to minimize the damage our brokenness has on other people?* And would you be willing to *question everything* for the next five weeks, including some of your questions and standards *themselves*?

Let's pray to that end.

So what I want us to do next is look at another passage to try and identify some *signs of destruction*, or *unhealthy* deconstruction. How do we know when we've crossed from a healthy approach, to an unhealthy one? For that, let's turn to **Genesis 3**. If you're newer to the bible, the first few chapters of Genesis essentially try to explain where humanity came from, what God wants for humanity, and then also what has gone *wrong* with humanity. Genesis 3 focuses on that last part: what has gone *wrong* with humanity.

And what has gone wrong with humanity is largely attributed to an interaction that humanity has with a serpent, who represents Satan or the presence of evil in the story. And I want us to take a look at what the serpent does as an example of *unhelpful* deconstruction, or destruction. Hop in with me in chapter 3, starting in v. 1:

[1] Now the serpent was more crafty (or cunning, or strategic) than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?"

Now, for those of you that know the story: *is* that what God said to Adam and Eve? Did he say "you can't eat from *any tree* in the garden"? Nope. Not at all what he said. In fact, he said almost the *exact opposite* of that, right? If you look back up in chapter 2, he actually says "you *can* eat from *any tree* in the garden—just don't eat from this *one tree* in the *middle* of the garden."

So Satan lies from the beginning. But remember: he's *crafty*. He's *strategic*. So he lies, but he does it *subtly*. He makes an accusation about God, but he does it in the form of a question: "did God really say you can't eat from any of these incredible trees? Wow. Sounds kind of controlling to me, but okay." This is what Satan does. He asks questions that are actually accusations or statements. "Does the bible *really* say that?" "Would God *really* ask you to give that up?" "Does that ethic *really* make sense in the 21st century?" That's how it starts. But it continues, v. 2...

[2] And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, [3] but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'"

So she passes the test. She doesn't bite on Satan's distortion about not eating from *any tree* in the garden. But she does fudge a *little*. She says that God *did* say not to eat from the one tree, *and not to touch it*, or they would die. God also didn't say not to touch it. But the seeds of doubt have been sown. She has shifted from seeing God primarily as creator and provider, to seeing God primarily as rule-maker. That's a key shift in her thinking. One that Satan capitalizes on, v. 4:

[4] *But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not **surely die**. (come on, Eve. That’s an *overstatement*. There’s no way that all *that* will happen if you just eat a little fruit. That’s overblown” You know what’s *actually* going on here? I’ll tell you,” v. 5...)* [5] *For God **knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.*** [6] *So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate.*

So this time, Satan’s strategy *works*. He convinces Eve 1) that God is holding out on her, and 2) that he can’t be trusted to tell them what good and evil is, since he’s petty and spiteful and on a power trip. So what Adam and Eve need to do, in his view, is eat from the tree, so that they can define good and evil for themselves. That way, *they* can sit in judgment over God and live in the way that *they* see fit. They can strike out their own definition of what’s right and what’s wrong.

And this is the problem that has been plaguing humanity ever since. We all want to define for ourselves, what good and evil *is*. This is the reason that people steal. It’s the reason people cheat. It’s the reason people hurt one another, harm one another. It’s the reason the Right and the Left can’t ever seem to agree on anything. Because we’re all attempting to put together our own version of good and evil. Right and wrong. We’ve rejected God’s definition of it, and insisted on forming definitions of our own. But none of us have the same definitions. And when you have 6 billion people on planet earth, each with their own definition of good and evil, you have a lot of conflict and brokenness and pain.

And this is also what’s *behind bad* deconstruction. It’s when we, in our limited understanding, decide to set ourselves up as judge and jury over God himself. We go you know, maybe it’s just that God doesn’t know how to run things in the twenty-first century. He doesn’t know how life works for us modern people. You know who does, though? Me. I’ve been alive for twenty, thirty, forty years. I think I’m probably well-equipped to be an authority on all of this. So let me use my own reasoning, my own intellect, my own limited understanding and experience, to decide what of God’s expectations are worth adhering to and which aren’t.

Good deconstruction is when we use the timeless truths of Scripture to evaluate and sift through the realities of our faith, and help us discern which things are true and good, and which aren’t. *Bad deconstruction* is when we use our own standards (or society’s

standards) to evaluate the truth claims of the bible. One of those is good and needed, the other one is unbelievably arrogant.

*[7] Then the eyes of both **were** opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.*

Deconstructing requires care and attention and thought and critical thinking. *Destructing* only requires anger and hurt.

We don't just *look like* we're abolishing, in Jesus' words: *we are* abolishing.

So the way we're going to approach it, just so you know where we're headed in this series, is that we're going to look at six *questions* that often contribute to people deciding to deconstruct their faith. Six topics that people wrestle with when it comes to Christianity, in one form or another. We came up with these through listening in to much of the writing and podcasting out there on deconstruction, but also from texting friends of ours who are deconstructing or have deconstructed. Here's what we came up with:

- Why are Christians so politically driven?
- Why does God care who I have sex with?
- Why doesn't God do something about evil?
- Why is the Church complicit in so much abuse?

- Why are Christians intolerant of other beliefs?
- Why is Christianity anti-science?

And there were a few reasons for that. But one of the main ones is that there is somewhat of a movement happening across America right now commonly known as the “deconstruction” *movement*. We’re going to go into detail on it a little later today, but in short, it’s a movement where people are asking hard questions of their faith in Jesus, and trying to peel back some layers to get at what they believe and why they believe it.

Now, on one hand, deconstruction isn’t anything new. Followers of Jesus have *struggled* with their faith, and many of them have decided to *walk away* from their faith, since the very beginning of it all. That’s nothing new. People have been doing that as long as there have *been* followers of Jesus. But on the other hand, the deconstruction movement does feel a little *unique*, in that it’s been given a name, and some public faces to it, and in just how many stories are attached to it. It’s a movement that is impacting and influencing a lot of people in the Western world.

And that *concerns me* as a pastor, but probably *not* in the ways you would think. Of course, as a follower of Jesus and a pastor, I grieve anytime people decide to abandon faith in Jesus. I believe that following Jesus is the best way to go through life, so of course I get sad when I see people deciding *not* to. But the *bigger* concern for me has actually been how the *Church* has *responded to* the deconstruction movement. As is often the case when hard questions get asked, the Church has often responded with fear and defensiveness, rather than compassion and understanding. We’ve sometimes responded by *attacking* the deconstruction movement and effectively stoking fear in anyone deconstructing, and anyone who would lend an ear to those people.

And *that* concerns me for two reasons. One, it just isn’t how *Jesus* responded to people’s doubt. Jesus had a pattern of compassion and mercy towards people like that. He showed *compassion* towards Peter after Peter denied him three times. He met *Thomas* where he was in the *midst* of his doubt. The only people Jesus responded *harshly* to were those who *pretended* to have it all together, to belong to him...while living lives that were blatantly in contradiction to him. He only *condemned* doubt when it came disguised in the form of religion and self-assuredness and self-righteousness. *Not* when it came from people asking honest questions and openly struggling to believe. To those people, he showed consistent, patient, *mercy*. And I think this is an area where we are called to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. Even *Jude*, one the early leaders in the Church, instructed us specifically in his letter to “be *merciful to those who doubt*.”

The other reason it concerns me when the Church responds defensively to doubt is because the effect it is having—and will *continue* to have—is that **it will push many people further away from faith in Jesus and belonging in the Church.** When I was thinking and praying through this stuff, I had a very specific image come to mind. Do you guys remember life on the playground as kids, and do you remember how so many kids would run *up* the slide to the top? This is what my son does on repeat nowadays. Okay...if the person deconstructing and doubting is the kid trying to run up the slide and slipping, what the Church is doing sometimes is the equivalent of giving the final kick that pushes them to the bottom of the slide. We're Santa Claus in *A Christmas Story*...anybody following me? **When we respond with defensiveness and antagonism towards those deconstructing, we often end up pushing even them further away from the one that can help.**

So part of what we want to do by endeavoring a series like this one is to try and chart a more helpful way forward in our local expression of the Church. **What does it look like to, instead of kicking the person doubting down the slide, instead offer them a hand?** And I guess you could say we're doing this series for two groups of people. **First, this series is for those who are, or will one day be, deconstructing.** I know of very few followers of Jesus who don't struggle with doubt at *some point* in their relationship with Jesus. The reality is that a relationship with Jesus—a real, actual, living, *breathing*, one—is not easy. Jesus asks us to do and say difficult things, to take difficult stands, to walk a difficult path. And if that doesn't ever lead you to ask some hard questions, you may not be fully thinking it through.

There are likely people in this room right now that, whether you would use this word or not, are *currently* deconstructing. You're asking hard questions about *what* you believe, and why you believe what you believe, and what the effects are of you believing what you believe. And if so, my prayer is that this series will be helpful for you. My goal is for you not to encounter any shade, snarky comments, or antagonism in this series. Our goal isn't to argue you into submission or to rebuke you. Now, there will likely be moments where your thinking may be *challenged*—*anytime* you open up the bible, that will happen for all of us. But our goal is not to win an *argument* against you. Our goal is to be *helpful* to you.

Additionally, there may be others of us in the room that wouldn't say we're *currently* deconstructing or doubting, but who may at some point in the future. Nobody *plans* to experience doubt. It just happens. And I would argue it's far better to be equipped in *advance* on how to navigate that, than it is to have someone try to help you *retroactively* in it. So maybe, even if you don't feel like you need a series like this *right now*, there may

come a time in the near or distant future where you will. So this series is for people in any and all of those categories.

But second, **this series is also for those who will walk with others *through deconstruction***. Even if you end up being one of the few that never experiences doubt yourself, you will almost assuredly have the opportunity to walk with someone else who *does*. And it's so important to me, in light of everything we've already mentioned, that we learn the ability to do that *well*. Too many people, at their first experience of doubt or questions about their faith, encounter a brick wall of suspicion and defensiveness from other followers of Jesus. And if we're going to be helpful to people, that posture needs to change. So even if *none* of this ends up being needed for you, I'd put money on it being helpful for *you* as you walk with *others* through seasons of doubt and deconstruction and questioning. So one way or another, I'm praying this series will bear fruit in and through our church family. Make sense? Okay.

So with all that set-up in mind, here's what I want to do this morning from the Scriptures. I want us to try and distinguish if we can between two different approaches to what is commonly called *deconstruction*. As I've met people in that pipeline, as I've talked to people who both went through deconstruction and walked away from Jesus, and those who went through deconstruction and came away from it with a healthier, deeper understanding of a relationship with Jesus, I've noticed there is a difference in the two approaches. And I think it's important that we distinguish between them.

One type of deconstruction, I would argue, is deeply and profoundly *biblical* in its intent. And it's the type of deconstruction Jesus does in Matthew 5. Let's take a look there. Start with me at v. 20:

[20] For I tell you, unless your *righteousness exceeds* that of the *scribes and Pharisees*, you will *never enter* the kingdom of heaven.

Okay, pause briefly with me there so we can understand what's happening. In Jesus' day, there were a few groups of people that were seen as the *model* of what life with God looked like. They were the examples *par excellence* of what it looked like to listen to God, to obey God and to live for God. Two of those groups were the "scribes" and the "Pharisees." These people, it was believed, had the godly life on *lock*. If you wanted to live a holy life, your goal was to look more and more like *them*.

But here in this passage, Jesus throws a huge *wrench* into the middle of that way of looking at the world. He actually says "if you want to live the type of life God wants from you, it's going to have to look altogether *different* than the scribes the Pharisees. They

don't truly understand what life with God is. So if you want to follow God, you're going to need to aim higher than them.

So don't miss what Jesus is doing here. He's taking an entire system of belief, and a social hierarchy that people had constructed in their minds about who was living out that belief and who wasn't, and he is disassembling it. He's turning it on its head. He is doing what at least a lot of people consider deconstructing. And he doesn't just stop with this statement—he continues. Verse 21...

[21] “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ [22] But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire. [23] So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, [24] leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. [25] Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. [26] Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

So notice what Jesus just did. He identified an Old Testament law (“you shall not murder”),

So with all that in mind, let's dive into our passage. John 6, starting in v. 60:

[60] On hearing it, many of his disciples said, “This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?”

*[61] Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, “Does **this** offend you? [62] **Then** what if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before! [63] The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you—they are full of the Spirit and life. [64] Yet there are some of you who do not believe.” For Jesus had known from the beginning which of them did not believe and who would betray him. [65] He went on to say, “This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled them.”*

[66] From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.

[67] “You do not want to leave too, do you?” Jesus asked the Twelve.

[68] Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. [69] We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God."

I'm concerned that what many are calling deconstruction isn't actually deconstruction; it's *demolition*. What many are doing is not breaking down the different components of Christianity in order to examine them each for truth and validity. It's taking a wrecking ball to the whole thing. And maybe to that you say "well Christianity deserves to have a wrecking ball taken to it. All it's ever offered the world is prejudice and condemnation and abuse and destruction." And I understand the sentiment. I really do. On the surface, it can certainly seem like Christianity has contributed a lot of unhelpful things to the world. We're going to get into some of those in this series.

But to say that Christianity has *only ever* offered those sorts of things is not a view grounded in history. Tom Holland (not Spiderman, but another Tom Holland), recently released a book called *Dominion*. And it's basically him making the case, very well

So this series is subtitled *how deconstructing your faith can help you keep it*. And we really tried to sweat that language. By saying that, we're not

Teaching Team:

- Danger of creating God in your own image by deconstructing him.
- Lindsay's example of breaking your hand. Don't chop it off. But you also don't want it to set and heal incorrectly.

Maybe John 6:

- Jesus says a hard saying. Disciples respond with acknowledgement of that.
- "Offense" - stumble
- "Some among you who don't believe"

Bucket

Something like “To see through everything is to see nothing.” (C.S. Lewis). It’s not wrong to ask questions. It’s not wrong to analyze and critique. And even deconstruct. The question is what are you working *towards*? What is guiding that process? Is it to get to the bottom of what is true and good and right? Or is it just to dismantle everything that has hurt you and everything associated with it?

Nearly 60 percent of people raised in Christian churches deconstruct their faith following high school.

Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*

Maybe lean heavily on illustration of Whit building legos. Sometimes he gets too far, and steps end up not working. And what we have to do is go step by step back to whatever piece got put on wrong, set it right, and then we can go forward again. That’s the healthy kind of deconstruction: let’s take pieces off until we get to the piece that got put on wrong, and then set it right, and then move forward. What would be unhelpful is if Whit just got all the way back to the wrong piece, and then kept tearing stuff apart for the heck of it. That’s the *unhelpful* type of deconstruction. Just tearing stuff down for the purpose of tearing it down.

Use this to unpack the difference between *deconstruction* and *demolition*.

Maybe use Nicodemus and Jesus from John 3 as an example of Jesus deconstructing a belief system.

What the exvangelical narratives often reveal, however, is not a lack of biblical literacy among those who leave — it is a lack of agreement with evangelicals around what the Bible means and teaches.

<https://religionnews.com/2021/08/28/evangelicals-youre-still-not-really-listening-to-what-exvangelicals-are-saying/>

The tendency is to see everything in black and white. Doubt is either an unmitigated good or a devastating evil. We also do this with people and churches: a church is either good or bad. The truth is generally somewhere in the middle.

One extreme—reflective of conservative Christianity—wants us to believe that doubt and deconstruction are inherently bad, a pathway inevitably leading to the cliffs of apostasy and faith abandonment. This extreme denies that deconstruction can be a legitimate place to encounter the living God. Here, deconstruction is caricatured as an all-out assault from the forces of darkness on truth, church, Christian culture, and ultimately the gospel.

Still, the extreme of the theological left is as destructive. The ideology and spirit of a

good deal of progressive Christianity almost requires us to undo traditional Christianity as a kind of compulsory experience. This is the sign that we're "evolved" and "liberated." Emerging from this seems to be a kind of laissez-faire approach to historic Christianity that rejects Jesus as the only way to God while seeming to suggest that doubt and deconstruction are (ironically) the only way to God.

Conservative Christianity critiques the new questions. Progressive Christianity scoffs at old answers.

(Swoboda)

Swoboda: Nobody—not even the greatest of theologians—can provide a finished theological product. There are always "loose ends," to borrow from Eugene Peterson. Before heaven, every belief is preliminary. Nobody is permitted the whole picture beforehand. All earthly theology is essentially preparing for embarrassment. Heaven, as such, will be that eternal deconstruction where God undoes all the half-baked notions and half-truths and replaces them all with himself.

Illustration from Swoboda's Q&R about the study where trees were grown in a biodome, that would grow tall and then fall over. One student identified that it was because there was no wind.

Proof that deconstruction can be a good thing:

- OT prophets
- Jesus ("you have heard...but I say to you...")
- Luther & the Reformation

Ecclesiastes puts it best: "There is a time for everything . . . a time to tear down and a time to build" (3:1, 3). There are times to tear down! Deconstruction is not bad in and of itself. Some forms of deconstruction have led to great life! (Swoboda)

...but if all you ever do is tear down, you're making one season all of life.

From Miriam Webster: Deconstruction doesn't actually mean "demolition;" instead it means "breaking down" or analyzing something (especially the words in a work of fiction or nonfiction) to discover its true significance, which is supposedly almost never exactly what the author intended. A feminist may deconstruct an old novel to show how even an innocent-seeming story somehow depends on the oppression of women. A new western may deconstruct the myths of the old West and show lawmen as vicious and criminals as flawed but decent. Table manners, The Sound of Music, and cosmetics ads have all been the subjects of deconstructionist analysis. Of course, not everyone agrees with deconstructionist interpretations, and some people reject the whole idea of deconstruction, but most of us have run into it by now even if we didn't realize it.

End with a hopeful invitation to "question everything" because God can take it. Not

nervous that if we ask too many questions of Jesus, he's gonna crumble under the weight of it all. People have been asking hard questions of the bible for over two thousand years, and it hasn't crumbled yet. I've got confidence that it's not going to now. Now, I will give the disclaimer: if you're asking because you just want to tear down and not because you want to understand, you may *feel* like it crumbles under that weight. No amount of answers are enough for someone who doesn't want answers.