

Taking the Bible Seriously, Not Literally: Jesus' Method

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Ancient Witness: Mark 7:1-9

It was the Spring of 2004, and we were in the midst of the great cicada invasion. When we went outside, we had to shout to hear each other. Seventeen years they are in the ground, and then they come out for a brief party before they die. And it was easy to forgive the nuisance these little creatures made. I figured that they deserved to whoop it up a little bit. Seventeen years! They are asleep, dormant for 17 years, and then they become alive for just a few days. I'd guess I'd celebrate, too.

I think that the cicada would be a great metaphor for Jesus if he ever experience them. After all, he would point out that most people are asleep, in a trance. People spend almost their entire lives like the poor cicada—dormant, in the dark. What kind of life is that? We need to wake up! We need to become alive and reborn! Come out into the sunlight!

Jesus was a great teacher, a rabbi and sage. He was barely 30 years old but so full of wisdom. Jesus embraced his own tradition of Judaism, but not as an end in itself. For Jesus, the primary purpose of the sacred writings, laws and traditions was to help him and others wake up and become aware, alive to the presence of God.

For Jesus, this is a continual process, a lifelong endeavor. It may begin when we crawl out of the darkness, but that is not the end—only the beginning.

This reminds me of a great comment by the poet, Maya Angelou. She said,

When people walk up to me and tell me they are Christians, my first response is the question, "Really—Already?" It seems to me it is a lifelong endeavor to try to live the life of a Christian.

This morning I want to talk a little about this lifelong endeavor to try to live the life of a Christian and how the Bible can help us. The scriptures can hinder us or help us, and we can look to Jesus himself for some clues.

Our text this morning has a typical encounter between Jesus and who you could call the fundamentalists of his day. That is, they believed in the literal truth of the Hebrew scriptures and sacred writings.

So these Bible-thumpers said, "Why do you and your disciples not live according to the tradition but eat with hands defiled?" So they quote to him chapter and verse, and Jesus offers a typical response by firing back a quote from the tradition himself. Usually he would appeal to the prophets, and this time he used Isaiah:

*This people honors me with their lips,
but their heart is far from me...
You leave the commandment of God
and hold fast to the traditions of humans.*

Jesus threw out the verses about hand-washing. And then he winds up with one of the greatest punchlines, on the the best one-liners ever attributed to him:

*You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God, in order to follow the Bible
(keep your tradition)!*

This little gem is one that all aspiring Christians should know by heart.

Now let me just pause here for a second to say a few words about why this matters. Some people have said to me, “Steve, why would you go to the mat over your interpretation of the Bible? Why is it that important to you that you don’t give in to a literal view of a few verses?”

Well, I could go on and on about the importance of honesty, integrity and authenticity. But let me point this out to you: If you think it doesn’t matter how people interpret the Bible, just look at some of the decisions and policies of recent past administrations. Many major decisions have been made on the basis of religious views and scriptural interpretation! Just look at the views of Supreme Court justices, U.S. legislators and state law makers who state that a fertilized egg is a full human person—their religious view—making any abortion a murder. Even an atheist should tremble that fundamentalism is taking over Christianity in America. So, defending the church from literalism is the final firewall against injustice.

When I look around at what is going on today, Pascal’s famous statement comes to my mind:

People never do evil so cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction.

When reporters have asked me for biblical justification for fighting for equal rights for gay, lesbian, and gender nonconforming people, often I’ve talked about the “ethic of Jesus” or “the way Jesus interpreted the Bible.”

How did Jesus make ethical decisions?
How did he interpret the scriptures?
How did he decide what what sinful or not?

The apostle Paul summarized Jesus’ position in his famous sentence: “The letter of the law kills, but the Spirit gives life.” According to Jesus, we interpret rightly when the scriptures open up into the Spirit. The Bible is important only if it opens our eyes, wakes us up, makes us alive to the Spirit. Too often, however, we use the wrong method to interpret and miss the life-giving Spirit. As the famous saying goes:

Too many Christians use the Bible as a drunk uses a lamppost—for support rather than for illumination.

The test is, does our reading of the Bible illuminate, or does it simply allow us to live in darkness?

Here's a Buddhist story. The nun Wu Jincang asked the Sixth Patriarch Huineng, "I have studied the Mahapari-nirvana sutra for many years, yet there are many areas I do not quite understand. Please enlighten me."

The patriarch responded, "I am illiterate. Please read out the characters to me and perhaps I will be able to explain the meaning."

Said the nun, "You cannot even recognize the characters. How are you able then to understand the meaning?"

"Truth has nothing to do with words. Truth can be likened to the bright moon in the sky. Words, in this case, can be likened to a finger. The finger can point to the moon's location. However, the finger is not the moon. To look at the moon, it is necessary to gaze beyond the finger, right?"

Jesus was a teacher, a rabbi. And it is important to remember that he took his tradition and the scriptures *very seriously*. But for him, it was all about the Spirit. It was all about the wordless wisdom. It was all about seeing the moon.

And so, for example, when some Bible-thumpers quoted Jesus chapter and verse about the Sabbath, how did he respond? (Mk 2:23ff) It is not lawful, they said, it is not biblical; it is not ethical, they said, to pluck grain or to heal others on the Sabbath. Jesus is remembered as quoting some other scripture verses back at them, and then another marvelous punchline:

The sabbath was made for human beings, not human beings for the sabbath.

How do we decide what is scriptural, what is ethical? We must ask, how does this serve humanity? How does it foster love? How does it further what is good? And so he threw out the verse when he needed to. He took the Bible too seriously to take it literally. In yet another encounter with some literalists Jesus said,

You have neglected the weightier matters of the law (the scriptures): justice, mercy and faith.

Ask yourself, does my interpretation of the Bible lead me to practice justice and mercy or not? As William Sloane Coffin said,

It is time to realize that any belief in biblical inerrancy is itself unbiblical.

It must be interpreted, put through the filter of justice and mercy.

Or, as Jesus said (Mk 12:28ff), remember that there is a preeminent principle, the greatest commandment of all: love God and love your neighbor. This is the ultimate measure of what is sinful or not, what is ethical or not. This is Jesus' method of reading the Bible.

In Luke (4:18-19), Jesus quotes Isaiah again, but he does something very interesting. He leaves out a verse. Can you guess which one? "The Spirit of the Lord has anointed me... he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed... to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor..." And Isaiah continues, "and the day of vengeance of our God." Jesus removed the image of a vengeful and violent God. He threw it out.

New Testament scholar, William Countryman, gave a sermon on yet another encounter with people throwing Bible verses at Jesus. This time it was a passage in scripture that made divorce legal. But Jesus saw how the letter of this law was being used to hurt women—leaving them abandoned, dispossessed and vulnerable in that first century patriarchal Palestinian culture. So then he says, "Moses only allowed divorce in the first place because of your hardness of heart." And then he abolishes divorce. He takes this Bible verse and pitches it out. Why? To protect women.

And he appeals to another verse that "a man shall leave his parents and be joined to his wife and the two shall become flesh." And he adds his own commentary: "Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."

I'll leave you with some of Countryman's words:

When religious people (that's us) read Scripture, we're still quite capable of using it to support and affirm our own hard-heartedness. White Christians in the early nineteenth century justified slavery by the Bible. After the Civil War, they justified discrimination against blacks by the Bible. Christians have justified wars by the Bible. Christians have justified Inquisitions by the Bible. Christians have justified the subordination of women by the Bible.

Hardness of heart is something that keeps on cropping up. It wasn't unique to the Pharisees in Jesus' audience. It's not specifically Jewish. It's an equal-opportunity sin. It's the property of the whole human race. You can't escape it just by being religious; but you can escape it by ceasing to be religious, either. And if you quit reading Scriptures, you not only lose passages that cater to your particular kind of hard-heartedness; you also lose the ones that might wake you up and suddenly let you see how really big and generous God's love is.

He concludes:

When Scripture seems to confirm your own hardness of heart, it's wrong. Ditch it, just the way Jesus did. Conversely, when Scripture breaks your world open and makes it bigger and more loving, it is achieving its true goal.

Hang onto that principle. It may not be the whole story, but it's a great place to begin and it will take you a long way. Hardness of heart is a dead giveaway that we've got it wrong. Only generous love can open the door to God's truth.