

Reading the Bible Like Jesus? Or the Pharisees? —a Comparison

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Reading the Bible Like The Pharisees

So what do we learn from Matthew about reading the Bible? For one thing, we learn not to read the Bible like the Pharisees! Practically speaking (according to Matthew), the Pharisees read the scriptures as Scribes who are not only untrained, but unfit for the Kingdom. Specifically, they read the scriptures in the following four ways:

1. As a book for its own holy sake. They emphasized the Law of God; the way to God was through the Law. Commands were to be meticulously sought out and enjoined. The Torah was to be read as "law," and not read "prophetically." In the process, the holy law of God was regarded as more important than the people for whom it was intended, and was brought against those people in abusive ways.

2. From an institutional view of the Kingdom of Heaven. According to the Pharisees, to take on the yoke of the Kingdom meant to obey the law. The temple and its ceremonial observances were at the center of obedience to the law. As a result, they rejected the new understanding of the Kingdom as presented by Jesus. When Jesus challenged the Temple and its sacrificial system (the institution), he was not only rejected by the Pharisees, but became the target for execution.

3. With a provincial view of God's favor. In Matthew, the Pharisees felt that God favors those who obey the law as "we" have interpreted it and have built up fences around it (to protect it). Only those who have obeyed the law in the "tradition of the fathers" are righteous. In effect, they taught that "God is on our side." In the process, they came to see their own interpretations of the law, as the true meaning of the law, and thus, equal to the law.

4. Without paying heed to the Messiahship of Jesus. They refused his mentoring. They saw themselves as the righteous, holy, and obedient ones, and they saw others, including Jesus, as law breakers. As a result, whenever they read the scriptures, they filtered out the parts that would have tempered their faith and actions, and manipulated the scriptures so that it championed their own agendas.

One of clearest messages that comes from Jesus in Matthew is, "Whatever you do, do not read the Bible like the Pharisees."

Reading the Bible Like Jesus

But we also learn from Matthew how we should read the scriptures: like Jesus. Unlike the Pharisees, Jesus' disciples should read as scribes trained for the Kingdom of Heaven.

This is easier to say than to do. As people, we have given ourselves for the last two hundred years to the quest of identifying with the earliest believers; we think we already understand about Jesus as Messiah, about the Kingdom of Heaven, and about true righteousness.

But it is more likely that we and every generation after us should start over. We should approach afresh especially the Gospels, reading them as showing the religious significance of Jesus, rather than as simple biography or history. We should struggle to understand all over again. We should re-read the prophets to discover their perspective on the law. And we should read more, much more, from the full canon of the scriptures (Old Testament and New Testament) through the new perspective of Jesus, which focuses on God beyond the letter of the law.

According to Matthew, disciples of Jesus should read the Bible in the following ways:

1. Under submission to Christ as Messiah. This means not only recognizing his authority, but just as importantly, understanding and recognizing the implications of his being "Messiah," the anointed one of God.

2. In concert with Christ as Mentor. We will watch him as the example and pattern for our own lives. We will see ourselves first of all as servants, and we will see others as in need. Gone will be the notion that we ourselves have somehow "arrived," and that God has put a special and exclusive sanction on every interpretation of the scriptures that our social history has authorized. Rather, our focus will be on the changes that we ourselves should make, seeing that when even we are compared to our Mentor, we are sorely lacking.

3. In view of our new perspective in the Kingdom of Heaven. This means a continual re-discovery of the nature and scope of the Kingdom of Heaven. We live in God's realm! We are disciples of our Mentor! How can we continue to read and apply the scriptures as though we lived elsewhere? Or worse, how can we continue to approach the scriptures as the Pharisees did? We must see the implications of the Kingdom of Heaven, not only for daily life and practice, but for the very way we handle the scriptures and people in the face of the daily drama we call life.

4. In light of the weightier matters of the law. Following our Mentor, we must emphasize the God of the Law, and we must stop focusing (like the Pharisees) on the Law of God. Now certainly, we will regard the scriptures as the holy Word of God. And from it we will seek to establish as authoritative what is central to the desire of God's heart. All specific commands and examples found in the scriptures, and all inferences and deductions drawn from the scriptures will be seen as subject to the deeper concerns of God's heart, which are stated in abundance throughout the scriptures. This does not mean a watering down of specific statements. Rather it means that specific statements should be seen and applied according to the dynamic perspective of Jesus.

Also, we will heed Jesus' warning to the Pharisees to, "Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice.'" We will seek out the unrighteous, being careful not to build an edifice that only perfect people can enter. We will certainly emphasize true righteousness, as Jesus does in Matthew 5. But when we apply the commands of the Bible to people, we will do so through the

more important matters of faith, mercy, love, and justice. This is not an excuse to circumvent the will of God. It is rather seeing, with the prophets and with Jesus himself, that more is at stake than a mere focus on words, commands, examples, inferences, and history.

So, we must affirm the importance of the scriptures. Jesus showed us that. But he also showed us that the scriptures are a window into the heart of God, not a book for its own holy sake. We must learn to read the scriptures "prophetically," as the prophets did, and as Jesus did.

To summarize all of this, we must read the scriptures as disciples who have been transformed into something entirely new. If we have sat at our Teacher's feet, if we have walked with him, and learned from him, then we have been trained to see the scriptures, people, and ourselves completely differently from the way we formerly viewed the same things. All of the following must affect the way we read the scriptures:

1. Our view of Jesus: who he is and what he came to do
2. Our view of ourselves and others
3. Our view of the realm into which we have been brought and now reside
4. Our view of the scriptures and of the desire of God's Heart

All of this is our new world-view, a new dynamic at work in us from Jesus.

A Test Case

Perhaps it will be helpful to give one parting, and very brief, example of applying this approach of Jesus to a specific text: Matt. 18:15-20. This is a well known text and it is often called upon.

At times the focus is on a single verse (v. 20), "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them." This is taken to mean that even a small gathering of people (in the mountains on Sunday morning, for example) are enough to take the Lord's supper.

At other times, the focus is on verses 15-17 which are understood as a direct command from Jesus, a three-step pattern for "disfellowshipping" a person who has sinned but will not repent: (1) talk to the person privately, (2) take two people with you, and (3) tell the church and disfellowship the person.

But it would be more in line with Matthew's account of this story to understand it as a plea from Jesus: "When it comes to dealing with people who have hurt you, make every effort to forgive them. Do not be hasty in your judgment!"

Now let us read this for the story that it is. This part of the story occurs only in Matthew, and is in the fourth teaching block of the Gospel. It is a part of a very interesting flow of discourse that runs from 16:21 to 20:19. It is all aimed at disciples, and tells us what kind of people we should be. Each section expresses a different quality that a disciple should have: attitude towards Jesus (16:24-17:13); kind of faith (17:14-21); attitude towards government (17:24-27); attitude towards self (18:1-

14; 19:13-15); kind of forgiveness (18:15-35); kind of morality (19:1-13); attitude towards wealth (19:16-26); attitude towards position (19:27-20:16).

Now, let's do that again. What kind of people should we be? Loyal, faithful, law abiding, humble, forgiving, moral, charitable, submissive! These are not sections which spell out "procedure" to be followed. These tell us about character! Matt. 18:15-17 is not a section on how-to proceed in the case of disfellowship. It is rather a plea that we forgive! We should not be ready simply to excommunicate someone, but to give them numerous avenues to repent. If no amount of effort succeeds, the church has the authority of Christ in its midst (vv. 18-20) to make the tough decisions that may be necessary; but only after every effort is made to reach the sinful person.

And to emphasize this point about forgiveness, the section is followed immediately by Peter's question, "How often shall I forgive my brother?" And then comes the story of the unforgiving servant. The whole section ends with this: "So also will my heavenly Father do to every one of you [throw you in jail!] if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

To read this story like Jesus, is to read it from the nature of his character as shown throughout the Gospel. Not to do so is to make the story mean something that it did not mean. To read it strictly as a "command," as though Jesus intended to give it as a new law, in place of the Mosaic law, completely misses the point. To see this text as outlining "the authorized method" to be followed in bringing someone to repentance, pays no attention either to the context of Matthew, or (more importantly) to the character of Jesus who spoke it!

Besides that, such an approach to this text misses the fact that Paul did not follow this method in 1 Cor. 5:1-13, where he enjoined swift and immediate dismissal of a sinful brother. Did Paul break the command of Jesus? Or should we take these as two different "authorized" methods? The answer is "No, and no!" Jesus is describing the character of a disciple: "forgiving!" Paul is dealing with a specific circumstance and a particularly dangerous problem. The circumstances make a difference, but the principle is the same: "that his spirit may be saved..."

The upshot of all of this is to point up the utter inadequacy of simply looking for commands. Anyone can see that commands exist in the scriptures. But the real question is, how is one to understand and apply the various commands? Like the Pharisees? Or like Jesus?

The Key: What Is It?

To read the Bible like Jesus is the proposal of this book. Surely, this is not particularly new. It is rather quite old, and many have understood these things. Nor is this the model to end all models. Rather, this model should be compared with others found in at least the Old Testament prophets, the other Gospels of the New Testament, Paul, Hebrews, and other parts of the scriptures—as they all exist in conversation with each other.

But as it stands, this model attempts to focus on the scriptures as the church's book. It sees the perspective of Jesus as providing a model for reading the scriptures. It sees the importance of evaluating contemporary situations, because that is what Jesus did. And most of all, it focuses on God as the very center of our faith and practice, so that we might apply his laws in keeping with his deepest desires.

This is not, however, an attempt to reduce everything down to the single hermeneutical key, love. This would be overly simplistic and misleading; to many people, such a statement connotes antinomianism (rejection of law) and projects a vague giddiness which functions as a pluralistic device sanctioning everything and requiring nothing, except the modern day notion of "live and let live."

This is not what Matthew says Jesus was about. Faith, love, mercy, righteousness, and justice, according to Matthew, are not substitutions for the law. They are the bounds within which the law is to be received, understood, and applied. Collectively, they are the colander through which any legislation is to be filtered as it is administered, not because they have independent value, but because they are what God wants. The hermeneutical key in Matthew is not "love." The hermeneutical key is God, as revealed by Jesus. It is God's desire, God's intention, God's heart that one must seek when applying law to life, not legislation for its own holy sake.

When it comes to the question of how disciples should read the scriptures, Jesus, in the Gospel of Matthew, has told us: We have been called to be "scribes instructed for the Kingdom of Heaven." And when we understand that instruction—the new world view of the kingdom of heaven; the significance of Jesus as prophetic Messiah; the cost and requirements of discipleship—we will know how to read the scriptures. We will have watched our mentor and we will have learned from him. Gone will be the desire to read the Bible like the Pharisees. We will have been with the Teacher! We will have learned!

And then, when we go into our storehouses to bring out treasures both new and old (in our sometimes wearisome debates), we may just find there another treasure, one that we have somehow forgotten: Jesus himself. The Bible is not the forgotten treasure, it is Jesus when reading it! For once we read the Bible like he read the Bible, we will be forever dissatisfied with a speck of gold here and a spot there. Indeed, he will lead us to the richest veins of all.

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