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**Reading the Bible Like Jesus Did**

*Purpose*: to show that we need to follow Jesus’ way of reading the Bible and choosing its’ highest values.

And we may only appreciate how vital Jesus’ priority of love is for guiding our interpretation, when we first recognize that the Bible’s writers often present conflicting (and developing) ideas. Passages also demonstrate how some texts can claim priority over other ones (cf. Prov 26:4 & 5).

***Vital Examples*:Old Testament Scriptures that are Challenged by Others**

***Circumcision*** The O.T. says, refusing it “cuts one off from God’s people.” For *all* of God’s ‘*eternal’* law is an “everlasting” requirement, even for “foreigners” (Gen 17:9-14,27; Ex 12:48f; Ps 119:152,160). *Yet*, N.T. writers say, “judge correctly,” arguing the Law should be “set aside” (Jn 7:24; Eph 2:15). For their direct *experience* of the Spirit among the uncircumcised shows that requiring it actually *opposes* God (Acts 15:1-11; Gal 5:2,18).

***After-life***Many O.T. scriptures say there is nothing good beyond death. “All” go to a gloomy existence in the grave called Sheol. Thus *no* one dead can praise God or even “hope for your faithfulness!” *Yet*, by late O.T., a few progress to affirming God will raise the dead (compare Eccl 9:1-10; Ps 6:5; 30:9; 88:10-12; 115:17; Isa

38:18 and Dan 12:1f; Ps 73:24).***Polytheism*** Many early texts say that *many* gods exist, and only call Israel’s god the “Most High” one who “renders judgment among the gods,” and so is “to be feared *above* the rest” (Ps 97:9; 82:1; 96:4; 95:3; 86:8; 135:5; 2 Kgs 17:35-39; Gen 3:22). But later texts come to see only *one* God. “There *is* no god apart from *me*.”

(Isa. 44:6-20; Jer 10:1-16) ***Polygamy***The Bible says God often *blessed* favorites with more wives *and* concubines (2 Sam 5:13; 12:8; SS 6:8)! Yet later it can imply that God had always intended a husband with *one* wife (Mt 19:5f; Tit 1:6; Gen 2).

***Women’s Status***Early Bible laws treat women as men’s *property*. Thus, a father can *sell* his daughter into slavery. He is also paid for his lost value if a man sleeps with her (Ex. 21:7; 22:16f; 20:17). A man may force any “attractive” captured women to marry. Women must marry their rapist. Adulterous *wives* will be executed for violating the husband’s property rights. But *men* with prostitutes or lovers, who are not another man’s property, live! Men only can divorce spouses, kill non-virgin wives, “cut off her hand,” “jealously” test if she can survive drinking fouled water, and require wives or daughters to break their vows. *Yet*, we read that Jesus challenges enforcing such double standards, and treats women equally.

(Cf Dt. 21:10-14; 22:13ff; 24:1-4; 25:12; Num 5:11-31; 30 & Mt 19:1-9)

***Sacrifices*** Early, they**’**re seen as making an ‘atonement’ that “pleases God,” and secures our forgiveness by making us clean from sin. *Yet* prophets later argue God does *not* want them, and “takes *no* pleasure in sacrifices.” *Only* a righteous life of mercy will do. So Jesus loved quoting, “I desire mercy, *not* sacrifice”

(Cf. Lev. 1:4-9; 4:26-35; 16:30; 17:11 and Hos 6:6; Isa 1:11-17; Amos 5:21-25; Mic 6:6-8; Mt 9:13; 12:7; Mk 12:33; Heb 10:6f).

***David’s Unbroken Dynasty*** A Psalm (89:3f,29-44) cites 2 Sam. (7:11-16)**:** “David’s line will endure *forever*.” Thus, even “If his children forsake My law… his line will continue, his throne as long as the heavens!” Yet it disagrees**:** “You *have* renounced the covenant with David and cast his throne to the ground.” For seeing that his sons’ disobedience *ended* David’s dynasty exposes that a new interpretation is needed!

***The Cause of Evil*** In 2 Samuel 24, *God* has David take a census for *war*. But a troubling plague occurs that was seen as God’s punishment for doing it. So later, 1 Chronicles 21 revises this, declaring that this census was *Satan*’s idea, not God’s! In 2 Kings (9:6f; 10:30) God *blesses* Jehu & his *dynasty* for an obedient massacre at Jezreel. *But*, seeing that every new king got murdered, Hosea (1:4f) later (re)interprets that God actually brought judgment *because* of Jehu’s earlier violence. So, many verses say *God* creates evil, violence, and deception (1 Kgs 22:19-22; Isa 45:7). *But* others say, *no* such darkness is in Him (1 Jn 1:5; Jas 1:13f).

***Judgment*** The Law said, it “pleases” God to “destroy” people, and declares, “I punish *sons* for the sins of their fathers” (Deut 28:63; 5:9; 2 Sam 12:14f). *But*, rejecting this, Ezekiel later says, God “takes *no* pleasure in the death of the wicked!” The Sovereign Lord declares, “You will no longer quote this proverb… For a son will *not* die for the fathers’ sins… the son will *not* share the guilt of the father” (33:11; 18:1ff).

***Prosperity & Suffering*** They’re explained as caused by God, based on *if* they kept his law**:** “If you obey, God will grant you abundant prosperity… If you do not, He will afflict you with diseases… blindness… painful boils… dire poverty… attack… disasters” (*Deut 28*,30; 6:3,24; 5:33). “Obey Moses’ law… Then you *will* be prosperous… The righteous find wealth & many years… no harm overtakes *them*… But the wicked find death…. This happens because of your sins” (Jos 1:7f; Pr 21:21; 3:2; 12:21; 11:19; 8:18; 13:21; Jer 13:22; Ps 37:25).

But other texts say that seeing sickness, poverty and disasters as judgments on sinners who merit such punishment is incorrect. So, righteous Job’s ‘friends’ point to *Deut. 28*’s explanation that people suffer because of sinning. But Job argues he is blameless, and that seeing him as deserving judgment is cruel. Then, *God* endorses this by severely rebuking the friends’ explanation! For Job’s main point is that a *righteous* man canface unexplained suffering (Job 36:7,11; 1:1; 10:7; 42:7; Eccl 7:15f; Cf. Isa 53).

A godly one argues, “I see the prosperity of the *wicked.*” And despite keeping a pure heart, “**I** *have* been long afflicted” (Ps 73). Jesus also denies that disaster is caused by *God*, because of a certain person’s sins. So rather than call the sick to repent, he assumes it is *Satan*’s work which must be undone (Jn 9:2f; Lk 13:2f ;

11:14-22).

***Such a variety of views means that we cannot avoid choosing* which *ideas will apply to our lives*.**

**Jesus & Scripture** He denies Jews’ accusation that he seeks “to abolish the Law & Prophets” (their Bible)! He clarifies**:** he’s “come to *fulfill* them” (Mt 5:17-20). And ‘fulfill’ can mean**:** ‘complete’ by bringing the O. T.’s ultimate purpose. That means bringing the ways of God toward which the Law was pointing.

But doing *this* meant that Jesus often cited Scripture and ***re****interpreted* its’ literal letter. For he directly proceeds to challenge and *reverse* things in the Law that they recognized as literal and plain. Thus, it becomes clear that Jesus saw his own contrasting interpretations as being the ways that truly fulfill it.

**Examples of How Jesus Challenged the Bible’s Literal Meaning**

***Foods*** Scripture said many foods made people unclean. Entering the body “defiled” them for being with God (Lev 11:1-47; 20:25f; Dt 14). *Instead*, “Jesus declared all foods *clean*,” reasoning that, “*Nothing* entering from outside can defile them,” *or* affect their “heart” (Mk 7:1-23; Lk 11:38-41; Rom 14:20; Acts 10:15)!

***Uncleanness***  Regular washings, and ostracizing those “unclean,” were required. Whole *chapters* rule out sharing space with “cripples,” all with “defects,” women on their “period,” etc. (Num 5:1f; Lev 5:2f; 7:21; 12-15; 21:16-21; 22:3-6). *But* Jesus repeatedly makes himself ‘unclean,’ and rejects all these rules. He even urges them to embrace the very folk God’s Law required be shunned (Mt 15:1-28; Lk 5:12f; 8:40-54; 14:13; 15:1f).

***Outsiders***  *Separation* from unclean uncircumcised foreigners is required (Dt 23:3f; Ex 12:43,48; Neh 9:2; 10:28). So Jesus’ embrace of outsiders angered Bible teachers. And *he* never quotes, “Be *holy* as I am holy” (Lev 11). Seeking holiness fostered excluding many. So, Jesus’ emphasis is, “Be merciful as God is *merciful*” (Lk 6:36). For this lets others join him in loving and embracing outsiders (4:25-29; 7:9; 17:18; Jn 4:1-9; Acts 10:28).

***Execution*** Without exception, Scripture required inflicting *death* on adulterers caught by eye-witnesses. *But* when these requirements were met, Jesus refused to follow this, and would not “condemn” a woman

(Dt 22:22; Lev 20:10 vs. Jn 8:1-11).

***Sabbath*** The Scriptures *required* death for providing on Saturdays for human needs that could wait. Thus, “All must stone a man to death found gathering sticks” (Num 15:32-36; Ex 20:9,10; 31:12-17; 35:2f). *But* Jesus defends his men’s similar actions, *and* he deliberately violates Sabbath, insisting that it’s the *best* day for his main work. He admits, “I am *working*,*”* for “my Father is alwaysat work.” He reasons that Sabbath must be “made *for* man,” and also that David too broke the Law’s rules to benefit others. Thus, he is able to argue that human need must come first (Mt 12:1-14; Lk 13:10-17; 14:1-6; Jn 5:10f,17; Mk 2:27).

***Divorce***Bible teachers quoted Moses’ law that *men* can write “displeasing” wives a divorce (Dt 24:1-4). But this formula put women at risk. So, Jesus rejects it as too permissive in violating God’s will & plan that “no one separate” (Mk 10:1-11; Mt 5:31f; Gen 2:24; 5:2). He explains that God only let “this law” be written that accommodated their sin *because* “your hearts were hard.” (Also Cf. Ezra 10:10 & 1Cor 7:10-16; God used inspired yet finite men, and Ezekiel 20:25 puzzlingly explains, God gave some “laws that were *not* good.”)

***Oaths*** The Bible commands us to swear honestly and “take an oath” (Dt 10:20; 5:11; 23:21-3; Lev 19:12; Num 30:2). *But* Jesus quotes this, and opposes it! “*But* ***I*** tell you, never swear an oath at all” (Mt 5:33-37; 23:16ff; Jas 5:12).

***Retribution***Jesus *quotes* the vs., “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” For Scripture often taught violent retribution (Lev 24:19f; Dt 19:21; Ex 21:24f). Yet Jesus’ love for enemies directly challenged doing this anymore**:** “*But* ***I*** tell you, do *not* resist an evil person” (Mt 5:38f). Moses had *limited* violent retaliation (no more taking multiple eyes)! But Jesus fulfills this law by extending it to seeking *no* retaliation (Gen 4:15,24).

***Enemies*** The O.T. defined loving a ‘neighbor’ as applying to fellow *Jews* (Lev 19:17f), but Psalms affirms that violently hating their *enemies* is “blessed” (139:21f; 137:8f; 55:15; 109:9-12). Thus, Jesus directly opposes this by saying, “You have heard, love your neighbor & hate your enemy. *But* ***I*** say, love your enemies”

(Mt 5:43f).

***Using Violence*** (a major reversal) In the O.T., a common way to deal with evil people was to *kill* them. This was commanded for a rebel child, a sexual sin, doing Saturday work, etc. Even a spouse or a child teaching false ideas must be assassinated (Deut 13:6-11; 17:2-7; 18:20; 21:18-21; 22:22-4; Lev 20:9-13; 24:10-23; 27:29; Ex

31:12-17; 22:20; 2Kgs 2:23f; 23:30).

Violence & ethnic cleansing were also a key in delivering Israel from her pagan enemies. Being “holy” required, “Show them *no* mercy… kill everything that breathes… women, children, and infants.” Such calls for “vengeance” implied, “*Blessed* is the man who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks.” A variation was, “Kill all the boys, but (as war’s “spoils,”) save every virgin girl foryourselves!”

(Dt 7:1f,6; 20:14-18; 2:34f; 3:6; 1Sam 15:3; 27:9; Jos 6:20f; 8:24f; 10:28-40; 11:11-20; Ps 137:8f; Num 31:17f,27; 2Chr 15:13; Nahum)

Believing God had typically brought victory by violence, Jews must expect the *Messiah*, as a king like David, who had many military exploits (2Sam 7), would again “rescue us from the hand of our enemies” *by* slaughtering their Gentile oppressors (Lk 1:74). But Jesus boldly rejects the devout’s reading that God had promised to again show Israel belongs to Him, *by* violently conquering their pagan enemies (Jesus looks to non-violent texts: Ezek 45:9; Hos 2:18; 4:2f; 5:2; 10:13; Isa 1:15; 2:4; 9:5; 11:6-9; Mic 4:1-4; Zech 9:9f; Ps 46:9; Job 16:17).

Jesus *never* calls his followers to kill, but to renounce violence and repayment. He warns that violating his “path of peace” only leads to future destruction. For those “who draw the sword will *die* by it.” So when his men use a weapon, *or* cite Elijah’s way to “destroy” God’s enemies by fire, he *rebukes* it. He also explains that “clubs” were not needed to capture him. Because, “*If* my kingdom were of this *world*, my servants would fight… but my kingdom is *not*” (Lk 1:79; 19:41-4; 9:51-56; Mt 26:51-56; Jn 18:36; cf 1Kgs 18:38-40;

2Kgs 1:10; Num 16:28-35).

He defined his mission by quoting Isaiah 61’s “setting free the oppressed” (Lk 4:16-30). But he eliminates the line Jews loved: another “day of God’s *vengeance*” on Israel’s oppressors. And he sensed this twist means, he won’t be “accepted as a prophet.” So, he seals their anger by adding that he will copy Elijah in *healing* hated enemies such as Nathan, a pagan general. Similarly, when John the Baptist stumbles because Jesus did *not* free him from their enemies, he cites his healings as fulfilling his view of Messiah

(Lk 7:22f; Cf Isa 35:5f & Jonah). For Jesus had radically redefined what it means for God’s Davidic King to win the battle that frees us from evil. Jesus’ Last Supper identifies him with Passover’s theme of liberation. *But* he ignores the Exodus victory’s reliance upon killing enemy nations. For the enemy that needs to be overcome is sin and the devil. Thus, he reveals that God’s true way to do this, is *not* as a warrior-king who sheds his enemies’ blood, but as a Servant who absorbs and defeats evil by letting his own blood be shed.

Indeed, Jesus’ way reverses Israel’s interpretation. The key to overcoming our enemies is love & mercy that returns good for evil. For imitating “God who is merciful” requires being “kind to the wicked” just like God! So, “Love your enemies so *that* you may be children of your Father.” For “peacemakers” are God’s true children, and it’s “the meek who will inherit the earth.” Indeed, Jesus’ only action toward the “Canaanites,” that Israel had tried to annihilate, was to “grant mercy” (Lk 6:27-35; Mt 5:5-9,38-48; 15:21-28; 10:38).

“Losing our life to save it” can mean, “Do *not* resist evil,” but “turn the other cheek.” It will mean no more “eye for an eye,” but “forgive everyone who sins against us.” For “Even pagans love those who love them.” But God’s way means the test is to “love your *enemies*, and do good to those who hate you.”For what looks like a way of loss is actually the way to “overcome evil with good” (Lk 9:23f; 11:4; Rom 12:21).

***Slavery*** (a modern application) Finding “Christ’s mind” (1Cor 2:16) isn’t easy. For 1800 years, *Bible* believers felt sure *it* endorsed slavery. It details how to buy other races as slaves, and how to properly beat them. It never tells readers to oppose owning people as “property,” but says, “slaves, submit to your masters in everything.” Thus in Civil War debates, those who quoted Scripture a lot, were *pro*-slavery. John Hopkins explains, “My conscience feels slavery is wrong, but I can only avoid erring if I submit to God’s Word, which so plainly supports it.” *Yet* today, it is hard to find believers who do not see Bible hints that God’s will and the call to love *opposes* slavery!

(Cf. Lev 25:44-46; Ex 21:7,20f; Gen 9:25; 1Kgs 9:22; Tit 2:9f; 1Pet 2:18)

**Blaspheming the Spirit vs. Recognizing the Spirit’s kind of Fruit** (Matt. 12:22-33; 7:16-20; Gal. 5:20) Jesus said that Scripture’s purpose is to lead us to him, and to loving others. Love’s importance may be why Jesus calls us to choose ways that produce the best “*fruit*.” For results guide our evaluation. And it was Jesus’ direct experience of God in his life that guided his unique way of reading Scripture.

Instead, Bible teachers opposed Jesus’ fruitful healing ministry, since it appeared to violate Scripture. But Jesus said that calling such a blessing, produced by the Spirit, Satan’s work, was the “blasphemy of the Spirit.” This effort to eliminate such plain evidence of God’s goodness was uniquely evil (12:31). For we must not harden our conscience’s ability to recognize and affirm the way of love.

Similarly, Peter knew that Scripture prohibited eating with Gentiles. Yet he disagreed, being able to see that “God has *shown* me” the fruit produced by the Spirit is already evident in non-law keeping Gentiles. What changed his interpretation was not studying the Bible, but what he saw in his experience (Acts 10:28).

**Conclusion: How Jesus (re) Interpreted the Bible**

Readers in Jesus’ day feared questioning the Bible’s literal rules. But this led to violating love. So, we saw Jesus imitate the prophets who’d faithfully challenged majority views. He notes that Bible teachers’ interpretations hurt *people*, and kept them from God, by missing what’s most important**,** “justice, mercy & faithfulness” (Mt 23:13,23f). He argued, the Law is “made for *man*.” So what nourishes human welfare has priority over its’ letter. And *loving* even those who wrong us is how we share in God’s character.

Indeed, Jesus spelled out *why* compassion changes the usual way to read it. He saw that our reading must lead to “*loving* God and neighbor.” For “*all* the Law and Prophets (their Bible!)hangs on *this*.” “So in *every*thing, do to others what you’d have them do to you, for this *sums up* the Law & Prophets!” “*No* command” is as “great” as this, because “love ***is*** the fulfillment of the law” (Mt 22~~:~~36-40; 7:12; Mk 12:31;

Rom 13:8; Gal 5:14).

The Old Testament rarely urged “love” for others. But hidden among laws Jesus ignored (on not mixing fabrics and crops, foods, haircuts, slaves, vows, etc), he found, “love your *neighbor*” (Lev 19:17f). It limited this to “a fellow Israelite,” but he redefined our neighbor as *every*one. Then, loving *them* became how “the *entire* law is fulfilled” (Lk 10:25-37). And since all the Scripture *hangs* on love, seeking to determine what love would do becomes the measure by which we too discern Scripture and God’s will.

We saw that Jesus challenges some Scripture as literally binding, and uses it *selectively*. And he urges us to “recognize his voice,” as we too look at what love for God and others means (Jn 8:47; 10:3-5; 14:26; cf 2 Cor. 3:6). When a text did not promote others’ welfare, faithfulness required *reversing* its’ apparent letter, and choosing *love* as what “fulfills” it. For we interpret Scripture best as we give pre-eminence to love.

Christians only get the Bible right, if they get Jesus right. For he warned that one can “diligently study Scripture,” yet miss what it’s all about. We need him to “explain all of the Scriptures” (Jn 5:39; Lk 24:27,45). For Jesus is the fullest “exact representation” of God’s true character (Heb 1:2f; 3:3; Jn 1:17f; 14:9). Thus, we are called to trust our Master, and *follow* his way of reading and wrestling with Scripture, as we do our best to weigh what parts apply to our lives in terms of his approach to living out the priority of *love*.

**Note: *Paul*** ***follows the same approach*.** He had fully kept God’s Law (Phil 3:6)! Yet he saw that this left him “the worst of sinners,” *because* as in many Scriptures, he had justified “violence” in serving God’s cause (1 Tim 1:13,15; 1Cor 15:9). So, he *sees* that following that way to purity is “under a curse,” and joins Jesus in arguing that what fulfills the entire law is “love that does no harm to a neighbor.” He agrees “the letter kills!” Thus, Paul is “led by the Spirit,” not Law. And being under “the law of *Christ*” lets him select the truths that encourage love.

(Gal 3:10; 5:6,14,18; 2Cor 3:6; 1 Cor 9:20f; 13:1-3; Rom 6:14; 7:6; 10:4; 12:17-21; 13:8-10; Tit 1:7; Acts 15; Heb 7:12)

Indeed, *all* the apostles unite on love as being all-important and taking precedence (cf 1 Pet 4:8; Jas 2:8; 1Jn 3:11-4:21). Like Jesus, they sought to morally discern Scripture. They reject food and Sabbath rules, polygamy, genocide and using violence, despite some opposing Scriptures. For these conflict especially with the value Jesus placed on love. Since *love* “fulfills,” and “sums up,” all other rules, they saw this as the Biblical way to read Scripture.