

Dear Friends,

In today's Christian culture, likely the most frequent and obvious error of interpreting Scripture is our ignoring the Bible's self-stated audience, "That the man of God may be..." (2 Timothy 3:17 KJV) In many populist pulpits you will hear this truth ignored and contradicted, Scripture is repeatedly and errantly interpreted as addressed to lost sinners, telling them how to save themselves, not as a faith guide to the saved to point them to the blessings of faith. Let me give a simple example.

In Romans 4:23-24, we read Paul's extension of the blessing of Abraham's faith to faithful believers today.

Now it was not written for his sake alone, that it was imputed to him; But for us also, to whom it shall be imputed, if we believe on him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead. (Romans 4:23-24 KJV)

The populist Bible teacher ignores Genesis 11-14 and its testimony of Abraham's strong faith in those chapters, forcing their own belief onto Genesis 15:6, "And he believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness," claiming this was Abraham's first act of true "Saving faith," his experience of salvation. However the preceding chapters, affirmed by Hebrews 11:8, contradicts this errant teaching. Hebrews 11:8 simply and clearly affirms that Abraham walked by faith, Hebrews 11 kind of faith, from the time he left Ur in the closing verses of Genesis 11. Simply stated by Scripture's witness, Genesis 15:6 was not Abraham's first act of faith. It was rather a faith act of an already saved man by faith moving his mind and life closer into harmony and fellowship with his God, and God's rich blessing on His child for that faithful conduct.

Romans 4:23-24 extends a similar blessing to saved children of God. It states that same promise to saved people; it does not teach lost sinners how to save themselves. Consider the simple language. Who is the writer? Paul, a seasoned and faithful apostle. Was Paul saved at the time he wrote the Roman letter? There can be no doubt that Paul was long since saved when he wrote this letter, so his use of "us" and "we" which includes him in this promise of faithful faith cannot be applied to lost sinners, for Paul was not a lost sinner.

At the time of this letter, were the Romans to whom Paul wrote the letter saved or lost? Consider Paul's personal testimony regarding them from the first chapter.

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world. (Romans 1:8 KJV)

Much more evidence could be drawn from the first chapter, but this verse settles the question. Could a people whose godly faith was known and discussed by believers throughout the Roman world be unsaved people? Or were they also saved? Only one answer, already saved, harmonizes with the clear teaching of Paul in these verses.

Given that we have abundant, undeniable, evidence that both Paul and the Romans were already saved when Paul wrote the Roman letter, what must we conclude when Paul writes "Now it was not written for his sake alone, that it was imputed to him; But for us also, to whom it shall be imputed, if we believe on him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead"? The "us" and the "we" "to whom it shall be imputed, if we believe" refers to already saved people, defining the rich blessings of faith to the faithful saved, not a proposition of uncertain salvation to the lost.

This lesson proves far too much for the modern proposal of possible salvation to the lost. It affirms the Lord's rich blessings to His faithful children, children already born again, already in His heavenly family, conditioned on our faith in the resurrected Jesus imitating Abraham's faith. As stated in this week's Gleanings, an errant interpretation of the true recipients of Scripture's message robs children of God of encouraging guidance and blessings for life.

Let's trust our faithful God to be faithful to His promises, serve Him with all our being, and learn from His personal handbook to us how to better live to His glory, as well as experience His blessings in richer proportion than we ever imagined possible.

Lord bless,
Joe Holder

Bible Symbolism—Good, Bad, Ugly

Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual. (1 Corinthians 2:13 KJV 1900)

When you read a passage in the Bible, how do you go about interpreting it? Is it literal so that you can study the word meaning and sentence structure directly? Is it symbolic? If so, how do you recognize the symbolism? Further, how do you interpret the symbols? I acknowledge that I approach these questions from a conservative perspective. I've heard sincere men take far too much imaginative liberty in their symbolizing of literal passages with their creative imagination (Human creativity does not translate to spiritual wisdom) in their interpretations of Bible lessons. Unless we can defend that our personal mind and opinions are divinely inspired, we need far more than "This represents..." to impose a symbolic meaning onto a Bible passage. For example, in my youth I heard a preacher repeatedly preach the same sermon many times from Isaiah 1:8, focusing most of his energy on "...as a lodge in a garden of cucumbers." Because cucumbers gave the man indigestion, he always slanted his interpretation of the symbol to his personal dislike of cucumbers and spent more time on his indigestion than on the passage, and he never gave the congregation the least contextual insight into what the lesson meant.

Excessive symbolizing of Scripture is not a new problem. It has long confused sound Biblical interpretation. Imposing allegorical interpretations onto non-allegorical Bible lessons serves to illustrate the sad and abandoned excesses to which the human mind will go in seeking novel, not sound, Biblical interpretation. Augustine's (Ca 354-430) allegorical interpretation of the lesson of the Good Samaritan will serve as a vivid example of this excess. According to Augustine—

1. The man who fell into the hands of robbers is Adam.
2. Jerusalem is heaven, and Jericho signifies man's mortality.
3. The robbers are the devil and his angels who stripped man of his immortality.
4. In beating the man, they persuaded him to sin.

5. In leaving the man half dead the devil and his angels left man in a condition in which he has some knowledge of God but is yet oppressed by sin.
6. The priest represents the law.
7. The Levite represents the prophets.
8. The Good Samaritan is Christ who, in bandaging the man's wounds, seeks to restrain sin.
9. Oil is hope and wine is a fervent spirit.
10. The man's donkey is Jesus' incarnation.
11. The man being placed on the donkey pictures his belief in the incarnation of Jesus.
12. The inn is the church.
13. The next day depicts the Lord's resurrection.
14. The two coins represent either the two precepts of love or this life and the life to come.
15. The innkeeper is the apostle Paul.
(Basic Bible Interpretation, Roy Zuck, Page 216)

We could not offer a more egregious example of eisegesis, of imposing our imagination onto a passage rather than drawing the text's true meaning from it. Often we may witness similar abandonment of sound interpretation of passages in the Book of Revelation. The literary genre of apocalyptic writing is designed for a broad-brush interpretation, not abandoned symbolizing or allegorical interpretation. Someone has written that, in times of intense trial and persecution, Christians tend to view Revelation as it was intended, a broad and encouraging simple message, "Jesus wins." In times of ease, Christians tend to interpret Revelation in all manner of fanciful and eisegetical (Imposing our ideas onto the text, not drawing the text's truth from it) interpretations.

My admittedly cautious approach to Biblical symbols is simple. If a New Testament passage refers to an Old Testament passage with a symbolic interpretation, I may safely follow the inspired New Testament explanation and its symbolic interpretation. If the New Testament does not refer to a passage, or refers to it in a literal manner, I try to follow the New Testament explanation and avoid symbolizing the passage in my interpretation. The moment we explain a passage not symbolized in the Bible with our personal "This represents..." we rely on our human imagination, not on Scripture itself. Studious Christians have long observed that the best and safest way to interpret Scripture is by Scripture itself. When we follow a Scripture text and its explanations of other passages, we truly allow Scripture to interpret Scripture. When we impose our imagination onto a passage, "This represents..." without clear Biblical support for the representation, we rely on our human imagination, not on Scripture. Our study passage directs us to compare "...*spiritual things with spiritual*," not spiritual things with our imagination.

If we were reading a personal letter or message in ordinary literature, our first steps in reading it would be to identify the writer, the intended audience, and anything we can learn about the setting and

purpose of the writing. Perhaps the most common error in Biblical interpretation in today's Christian culture appears in readers' ignoring this information. Commonly this failure prompts them to interpret Biblical passages intended for one audience as if they were directed to a different audience. ***What does Scripture tell us about its intended audience?***

All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works. (2 Timothy 3:16-17 KJV 1900; emphasis added)

Based on this text from the New Testament, who is the intended audience of "***All scripture***," the lost sinner or the "***man of God***"? Further, most of the New Testament books or letters contain internal identification of both the author and the intended audience. For a professing Christian to ignore this clear teaching and interpret a passage as if it were directed to lost sinners is an inexcusable case of willful ignorance and wresting of the Scriptures. (2 Peter 3:16 KJV) It further leads the errant interpreter to wrong beliefs regarding the content and purpose of Scripture. If we accept the New Testament's own witness of its purpose, contents, and intended audience, we discover that likely as much as 90% or more of the New Testament was written for the instruction and faith walk of children of God, the "***man of God***." Accepting this inspired focus of Scripture, we discover a rich source of wise instruction for every situation we face in life. If we ignore this Biblical information and wrongly impose our private opinion onto Scripture, presuming it was written to lost sinners, we have almost nothing in the New Testament to guide our path, and we fall into the errant idea of salvation by works, a doctrine which New Testament apostles and Scripture writers faced and rejected in New Testament writings. Salvation by faith, also common in today's Christian culture, is in fact a "Side door" salvation by works idea. According to Scripture, ***our salvation was wholly accomplished by the object of our faith***, Jesus, not our faith in our faith.

When we ponder this question, how do we go about this challenge of right Biblical symbolism? First, a simple cliché serves the serious Bible student well, "***When the literal sense makes sense, look for no other sense.***" Further, never reach a conclusion regarding the meaning of a passage till you have clearly identified both the inspired human author and the first audience or recipients of the writing. When you begin to seek a right application of the passage to your life and thought, apply the passage to the same kind of people whom the inspired text identifies. In all passages, apply the 2 Timothy 3:17 filter to the text, "***...that the man of God may be....***" Quite literally, our Lord sent a flawless handbook from heaven to guide, instruct, and comfort His people through their pilgrimage in this world. Apply no interpretation to any Bible text that robs you of that rich instruction.

As a simple example, consider the fanciful and imaginative, but wholly irresponsible interpretation of the lesson of the Good Samaritan that Augustine taught. Then go to Luke 10:25-37 and study Jesus' teaching. He taught this lesson in reply to an unbelieving, tempting lawyer who questioned his own answer to Jesus from the Old Testament law, "And who is my neighbor?"

Jesus used the Good Samaritan story to answer the lawyer's question and to teach a timeless lesson. First century Jews despised Samaritans, all Samaritans, merely because they were Samaritans. The man who fell among thieves faced a desperate need. Two respectable Jews passed by where the man lay

helpless and “Half dead” by the roadside, and continued on their way, wholly ignoring the man. You can almost hear their self-righteous muttering, “He likely deserved whatever happened to him. He’s not worth my time or effort.” Then the Samaritan walked the same path, saw the man, and immediately took compassion on him, and did everything in his power to help him.

Jesus’ question to the skeptical lawyer makes His lesson crystal clear for our minds.

Which now of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbor unto him that fell among the thieves? And he said, He that showed mercy on him. Then said Jesus unto him, Go, and do thou likewise. (Luke 10:36-37 KJV)

The self-righteous lawyer heard more than he anticipated from Jesus. Jesus forced him to conclude that a despised Samaritan was more righteous than a Levite and a priest, two classes of Jewish men who should have been the most righteous of men in the culture. “Good” and “Samaritan” would have seemed contradictory in this man’s mind, but Jesus sets the scenario so that he could not retain his sinful prejudice. The lawyer agreed with Jesus that loving our neighbor is a basic requirement of Moses’ Law. When Jesus questions which of the three men was in fact a true “Neighbor” to the poor man, he could answer only as he did; the Samaritan was the neighbor, fulfilling the Law, and the two supposedly righteous Jewish men failed a fundamental moral principle of the Law. The lawyer likely felt the sting deeply when Jesus told him, “Go, and do thou likewise.” Go and imitate a Samaritan!

Why did Jesus teach this lesson? What did He intend for the skeptical lawyer, and us, to learn from it? Augustine’s fanciful symbolism? Or a timely principle of human kindness toward our fellowman without considering whether he deserves our kindness or not. Do we deserve God’s kindness toward us? As in this lesson, the excessive use of symbolic interpretation often robs us of the rich and timely truth of Scripture, perhaps teasing our fanciful imagination, but doing nothing to instruct or edify us.

Elder Joe Holder