

Why Are there So Many Interpretations of the Bible?

Matthew 5: 14-20

“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. People do not light a lamp and put it under the bushel basket; rather, they put it on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks 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. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

The question of the day is “Why are there so many interpretations of the bible?” How is it that we can read the same bible, say we are following the same God, but then end up with two entirely different, if not opposite, interpretations of what the text means?

So let’s start with a photo I took of a vehicle license plate while driving with the kids one day. It read, “LVMYPTS”. What do you read it as? The funny thing is when I asked the kids, they said, “Love my parents!” Aww, that’s nice. When I asked Joy, who is a nurse practitioner, she said, “Love my patients!” When I asked someone with dogs they said, “Love my pets!” Or is it “Live my priorities?” Or is it “Leave my parents” because they are headed to college? Or “Love my parts” because they are a mechanic? How do we know for sure?

It turns out, at least on the surface, that interpretation is in the eye of the beholder. In its earliest form the Hebrew scripture didn’t have any vowels, so the entire Old Testament looked like the license plate. Which meant the rabbis and teachers who interpreted these scriptures had to wrestle with all the different ways of looking at it. It is how we get the adage, “If you have four rabbis in the room, you are going to get five opinions.” Often times, they couldn’t agree with themselves! Or have you ever noticed how something we once read, may have meant something at one time in our lives, while later in life it means something else? It keeps things fresh and is how preachers keep their jobs!

You see, scripture is a living and breathing document. It is why our earliest reformers believed that the word of God wasn’t primarily the words written in our bibles, but the word that is translated, interpreted, spoken and ultimately embodied by God’s people in our context and time. Because the words on the page are just words on a page unless the word becomes flesh and is alive among us.

Turn to the Sermon on the Mount, for example. Jesus says, “You are the light of the world!” He goes on to describe we are like a lamp that has the potential to light up the world. So we are to

shine our light like they used to do on a hill, and not cover it up, so others give thanks to God for our good works. So let's interpret it? What is our light? What are the bushels? What are good works? Churches have historically built their high dollar cathedrals on top of hills because they've taken Jesus' word literally. Or we could go metaphorical believing our light is our gift. Or is this something we are born with?

But then there is a Psalm which says, "God's word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path." Could Jesus be saying that the words on the page mean very little unless they are put into real-life practice? Which is why after telling us we are the light he launches into how he hasn't come to abolish the law but to fulfill it down to the smallest punctuation mark, and that unless our desire for what's right exceeds the Pharisees and scribes, whose job it was to understand and implement the law, we won't enter the kingdom of heaven. It turns out Jesus could be saying that we could have the bible memorized, understand all the stories, make it our job to interpret the bible, and still miss the point. It's why he always says, "You've heard it said...but I say to you..." Because the bible isn't a history book, or an instruction manual which dropped out of the sky for us to follow like a piece of IKEA furniture. It's a living, breathing document full of stories, and poetry, and letters of people wrestling with who and what and how God is throughout different times and different places for different people.

So here's an honest confession: there is no such thing as a "pure" or "exact" meaning. When we interpret scripture there is no such thing as an objective truth. And ironically, the more I insist that I'm giving you an objective truth, the less objective I'm actually being. The beauty of scripture is that it can mean different things to different people at different times—four rabbis, five opinions. BUT scripture can become dangerous when we pretend like we aren't reading our culture or issues into it—which always ends up being more about us than it does about God. Because it turns out, there is no such thing as an absolute meaning. "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisee and the scribes, you can't enter the kingdom of heaven."

It's the dangerous path of only one interpretation that Nazis, cult leaders, slave owners, Christian nationalists and televangelists have used to scare people into backing their agendas, signing over our cash savings, and justifying their need for violence in the name of God. I can't tell you how many times I have heard people tell me that they—what's the phrase—*only live biblically*—which is saying they live according to God's will in scripture as if it's only one way. Then they go onto say that they have a "personal relationship with Jesus." Which is a wonderful thing, except having a personal relationship isn't in the bible. St. Paul tells us to greet each other with a holy kiss—who does that? And women should wear head coverings, and men shouldn't trim the edge of their beards, and there's even a law in Leviticus that says if your kid is mouthing off to their parent, the parents are supposed to take the child outside the gates and stone them! The truth is nobody "only lives biblically" and if they did, they'd be a horrible person! There is no such thing as a pure interpretation or a single meaning to the biblical text. And as soon as there is, it becomes exclusive, legalistic, and in many ways the direct opposite of what the gospel is about.

But hold on! Here's the other side of the coin: there is a faithful way to read scripture responsibly. We look at the context, we read what comes before and after the story, we try to understand the original languages. But if we don't have a theological degree, it's safe to ask:

does the interpretation open us up to deeper love for the world? Does it challenge my own biases and judgements, or does it justify them? Does it lead me to loving my neighbor and forgiving them, or does it lead to fixing them and all the ways they don't get it?

So, here's what I have learned to do when I get in a "disagreement" about what some text in the bible means. Disclaimer: this is only my way of doing it. Whenever someone uses the bible to condemn or justify a judgement in the name of being "biblical" I use St. Paul's words from 1 Corinthians: "We can have faith to move mountains. We can have all the knowledge and understanding what the word of God means. We can convert the whole wide world in Jesus' name...but without love, it means nothing." Because without love we actually don't have real faith, or knowledge and understanding, and we will be converting people out of fear. "Unless you exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees and the scribes, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven."

So perhaps the more beautiful question isn't why are there so many interpretations out there, but what are we doing with ours? Because, as Jesus says, we are the light of the world. Which more than likely shines brighter when we are free to admit our interpretation is one beautiful way among many. Because God's word is always about love which keeps God's Word both alive among us right now, and truer than we could ever possibly imagine. Amen.