

Jesus and the Word

M. W. Bassford, 3-14-10

In our previous lessons in this discussion, we've seen that God expects us to obey His will, and that everything we need to know is contained in His word. However, if we leave things there, it's kind of like handing a starving man an unopened can of chili and saying, "Here, eat". The man needs some kind of tool to get into the can so that he can eat, and we need to know what intellectual tools we can use to get into the word so that we can feed our souls.

In this, as in all other things, our example is Jesus. We are disciples of Christ, and that means that we dedicate ourselves to imitating Him. We want to develop the relationship with God that He had, the love for others that was such a central part of His character, and the commitment to righteousness that He possessed throughout His life. As part of this, though, we also want to learn to read the word like Jesus read it. It is true; Jesus lived under the Law of Moses, and we live under the law of Christ. We operate under a different covenant than He did. However, we can still use the behavior of Christ to determine how God wants us to handle His law generally, regardless of which law it is.

In fact, this is a relatively easy task. The Scripture is far from silent about the way that Jesus dealt with God's revelation. The gospels contain more than enough information about the way that Christ used the Law of Moses for us to figure out what His overall philosophy about reading the Scripture was. Once we look at those passages and sort out that philosophy, we can adopt it for our own. We can learn to use the Scripture like Jesus did, and if we do that, we can be certain that we're using it as God wants us to. With this goal in mind, let's look at Jesus and the word.

How He Used It

Before we go any further, we need to pause and spend some time considering just how Jesus used the word. In other words, when Jesus cited Scripture, what kinds of things was He looking for? From the record of the gospels, we first see that Jesus used the Law to **POINT TO COMMANDS**. Look at the exchange recorded in Luke 10:26-28. In context, here's what's going on. A lawyer has just come to Jesus and asked Him what the greatest commandment was. Jesus turns the question around on him, the lawyer replies with "Love God" and "Love your neighbor", and Jesus agrees with him. However, Jesus doesn't stop there. He also tells the lawyer that if he does those commandments, then he will live. Conversely, if the lawyer DIDN'T do those commandments, then he wasn't going to live. Clearly, the commandments of God were not an optional matter to Jesus. They were quite literally a matter of life and death.

If we want to understand Scripture in the same way that Jesus did, we need to place the same weight on the commandments of God. Whatever the word instructs us to do, we must do. Whatever the word forbids, we must not do. There can be no argument, no discussion, no noise about how the Bible is actually out of date these days. There can only be obedience. If we fail to obey, we both endanger our souls and prove that we are no disciples of Jesus.

In His dealings with Scripture, Jesus also **CITED EXAMPLES** to explain His conduct. We see the best example of this in Matthew 12:2-3, 5. In this case, the disciples of Jesus have been walking through some grainfields on the Sabbath, and as they've been going along, they've been idly plucking heads off of the grain and eating them. Along come the Pharisees, who were the spiritual tattletales of the first century, and accuse the disciples of working on the Sabbath, as though yanking the head off a stalk of grain were any kind of work to begin with. Rather than dealing with this absurd accusation on its own terms, Jesus refers back to an example from the Law. The priests who served in the temple offered sacrifices continually, even on the Sabbath, and hauling water, wood, and animal carcasses around was much harder work than anything the disciples were doing. The priests clearly worked on the Sabbath; however, because they were working in God's service in obedience to His commandment, their work was acceptable to God. Jesus' argument is that if the priests could work in the service of God without breaking the Sabbath, so too could His disciples. He uses an example of conduct that was pleasing to God to show that His disciples' conduct was pleasing too.

As disciples of Jesus, we should use this kind of example-based logic too. Just as Jesus turned to the conduct of the priests to learn what He could do, we can turn to the behavior of the early church to learn what God wants us to do. Just as the disciples who imitated the priests were acceptable, we ourselves are acceptable if we imitate the righteous.

In addition to using what was present on the face of the text, Jesus also **MADE INFERENCES**. Consider His words in Matthew 22:29, 31-32. In context, the Sadducees, a sect of Jews who did not believe in the resurrection of the dead, have presented Jesus with a hypothetical that they think proves their point. This is Jesus' response. He refers back to Moses' encounter with God in the burning bush. God didn't identify Himself by saying, "I WAS the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." Instead, hundreds of years after those men died, He said, "I AM the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." Because God is the God of the living, not the dead, the logical implication of that is that somewhere, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob must still be alive. Thus, Jesus concludes, the resurrection from the dead is taught by Scripture, all on the basis of the tense of a single verb, and He rebukes the Sadducees because they didn't know the word well enough to see it.

If we want to be the same kind of students of the word that Jesus was, we also must be willing to make inferences from what the text implies. We need to pay attention not just to what the word says, but to where it leads. Like Jesus, we need to follow every scrap of revelation to its logical conclusion. To some, this might seem unduly speculative. However, if Jesus held the Sadducees to this logical standard, we can be certain that He will also hold us to it.

Even beyond this, Jesus was willing to use inference **TO ESTABLISH PRINCIPLES**. Let's pay attention to how this worked in Matthew 19:4-6. Here, the Pharisees have come to Jesus demanding to know His position on divorce. In response, Jesus works from the text of Genesis, which explains how God instituted marriage by creating us male and female and joining us together. From this, Jesus makes the inference that if God joined husband and wife together, it's because He wanted them that way, so we must not tear those bonds apart by divorcing one another.

Notice, friends, that this is just one passage that Jesus is addressing here. However, on the basis of the logical implications of that one passage, Jesus pronounces an entire doctrine of divorce and remarriage. Jesus doesn't do this by fiat. He doesn't say, "You can't divorce one another because I'm the Son of God." Instead, Jesus concludes that that doctrine was in the Law already. In the same way, we should be unafraid of establishing doctrines on the basis of the logical conclusions of the text. If Jesus did it, it's because He meant His reading as an example for us.

What He Used It For.

In addition to learning how Jesus used the word from the gospels, we can also learn what He used it for. As we've seen already, He used it for **DEFENDING HIS PRACTICE**. This is quite obvious in Matthew 9:11-13. The Pharisees come at Jesus demanding to know why He ate with tax collectors and sinners, people whom they considered unclean. In response, Jesus turns to the word. He cites a passage from Hosea in which God explains that He doesn't want us simply to be legalistic followers of His commands. He wants us to be a loving and merciful people as well. Because God required mercy from His people, Jesus felt justified and even compelled to reach out to and eat with sinners.

We can do the same thing with the word today. The Bible should define our practice, and we should be willing to use the Scripture to defend our practice. We should know what God's expectations are for us, both in the overall principles of the word and in its most precise details, and we should fearlessly carry out those expectations. If we understand the word in this way and we base our behavior on it, we are walking in the footsteps of Jesus.

We also see Jesus using the word for **RESISTING TEMPTATION**. Consider His exchange with the devil recorded in Matthew 4:8-10. Because of His humanity, our Lord was exposed to temptation in the same way that we are. However, notice that His response is one that few of us master. Where we can be seduced away from God by the promise of some small pleasure, Satan takes Jesus up to a high mountain and promises him literally the whole world in exchange for worship. Jesus angrily refuses him, and does so on the basis of Scripture that lays out His duty to God.

Sometimes, I fear that we don't get as much from this story as we should. The reason why Jesus was able to overcome temptation here and throughout His whole life was because of His mastery of the word. Whenever the devil came at Him with some temptation, He was always able to reply, "It is written." Do we do that? Do we know the word well enough that whenever temptation crosses our path, we're able to analyze it according to the Scripture and respond with book, chapter, and verse? Do we have the courage and commitment to God in those times of trial to focus on the word and not on the forbidden pleasures of sin? If we find ourselves stuck in a spiritual rut, always losing the same battles again and again, our problem may not be a temptation problem. It may be a word problem. Let's use it like Jesus did.

Jesus also used the word in **REFUTING FALSE DOCTRINE**. Like the last point, this one too comes from the story of the temptation of Jesus, and we see it in Matthew 4:5-7. In this case, Satan returns to a favorite tool of his and distorts the Scripture to his own uses. He cites a passage from Psalms in an attempt to get Jesus to throw Himself from the pinnacle of the temple in a foolish display of pride. Jesus knows the word well enough to correct Satan's misuse of it with the correct application of another Scripture, and so, He is able to rebuff the temptation placed before Him.

If we are truly disciples of the Christ, we will be able to do the same thing with the word. Misuse of the Bible is everywhere around us. We all know people who believe error. Do we know the word well enough to bring out the truth? Can we lovingly show others their mistakes from the Scripture? Or are we ignorant instead, so that we can only meet their uninformed opinions with uninformed opinions of our own? Let's prepare instead, and rightly handle the truth.

Finally, Jesus used the word **TO REJECT HUMAN TRADITION**. This often came up in His debates with the Pharisees, and we see Him doing it in Matthew 15:3-5. The word commanded the Pharisees to use their financial resources to take care of their parents, but the Pharisees got around that by pledging their money to God and setting up a tradition that said that pledged money didn't have to be spent on honoring parents. Jesus called them on it.

We often see the same thing around us, where various religious groups have set aside the word of God in favor of their traditions. If we want to be like Jesus, we must know how to address that. We must know where the traditions of men contradict the word of God, and be prepared to champion the truth whenever we are given opportunity. These traditions may be dearly held by others, but they are not right, and like Jesus, we must use the word to prove it.