Doing and Saying – a Christian Pilgrimage

Reading the Bible – Week 18

Problems and confusions

Day 120: Hold on…

Hold on here! I've got a conflict to raise with you.

Oh? Please go on!

You asked us to read the Bible 30 minutes each day, and I've been trying to do that. In my reading, I came across this:

"When that time comes, people will no longer say, 'The parents have eaten sour grapes, but the children's teeth have grown numb.' Rather, each person will die for his own sins. The teeth of the person who eats the sour grapes will themselves grow numb. (Jeremiah 31:29-30)

and this:

The Lord's message came to me: "What do you mean by quoting this proverb concerning the land of Israel:
"'The fathers eat sour grapes, and the children's teeth become numb?'
"As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, you will not quote this proverb in Israel anymore! Indeed! All lives are mine—the life of the father as well as the life of the son is mine. The one who sins will die. (Ezekiel 18:1-4)

… and yet you've told me I'm responsible for all the sin of the world, no matter who does it? Yet here, I understand that I'm being told to worry only about myself – others' actions are not my responsibility.

Great point. I must agree with you. The above passages are telling you to worry about yourself, and your own sins (sins are ways you miss the mark of God's holiness that He calls us all to). What might those sins include?

Lying, cheating on your spouse, stealing, murder, all the usual.

True! You can find the entire list in Exodus 20. There are also the commandments and guidelines Jesus gave us, some of which we covered earlier, and other guidelines scattered throughout the bible. All these commandments, though, can be wrapped up in two instructions, which I'd like to revisit:

Jesus said to him, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. The second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the law and the prophets depend on these two commandments."

Each of us, in our walk with Christ, need to determine, "What is the most loving thing for God? What is the most loving thing for our neighbour? What is the most loving thing for ourself?" We miss the mark of holiness not necessarily when we fail to achieve through our actions, but when we fail to strive – strive for the most loving thing for God, for our neighbour, and for ourself.

And the most loving thing may be to warn our "neighbour", even if they are a despot on the other side of the world, that what they are doing is wrong?

It well may be, yes.

You don't make this easy, do you?

We are all explorers, together with Christ as our guide – He promised us an abundant and full life, but it frequently requires much discernment and communication with God and with each other. We don't just journey individually, but in community. We are accountable not just as individuals, but also as community. Thank you for bringing this up – the Christian life is full and wondrous, and not always easy.

What are your thoughts regarding the issues raised here, about accountability of self, community, and others' being responsible for their own actions?

Share your answers with others whom you trust.

Day 121: Reading the Bible.

Together, we can examine apparent conflicts in the bible by stepping back and examining them from the larger context of what God fundamentally desires from us all. The bible is a complex book – it can be hard to understand! Here are some guidelines to approach it, which hopefully will help you:

a.) Don't read it at surface-level.
b.) Read it at surface-level.

You're trying to help me?

I am! Sorry to be confusing. Remember how Jesus said all the law and the prophets depend on the commandments of Love God and Love your neighbour as yourself?

Yes…

Keep that in mind when you read through scripture. As you read it, ponder, "How does this teach me love of God?" and "How does this teach me love of neighbour and myself?" Search through at that level. Then, read it at the surface level: "what does the scripture portion actually say?"

That seems backwards.

Fair enough – the important thing is not the order that you do it in, but that you do both: surface and sub-surface reading. We'll look at some problematic examples this week to illustrate that.

Think of some examples where you've struggled over scripture readings. How do they teach you love of God? How do they teach you loving your neighbour as yourself?

Share your answers with others whom you trust.

Day 122: Reading the Bible – killing for God

The following are snippets from the first book of Samuel, chapter 15 (I have selected specific portions for the purposes of our study, feel free to read the full chapter in your bible):

Here is what the Lord of Heaven's Armies has said: 'I carefully observed how the Amalekites opposed Israel along the way when Israel came up from Egypt. So go now and strike down the Amalekites. Destroy everything they have. Don't spare them. Put them to death—man, woman, child, infant, ox, sheep, camel, and donkey alike.'"

Then Saul struck down the Amalekites all the way from Havilah to Shur, which is next to Egypt. He captured King Agag of the Amalekites alive, but he executed all Agag's people with the sword. However, Saul and the army spared Agag, along with the best of the flock, the cattle, the fatlings, and the lambs, as well as everything else that was of value. They were not willing to slaughter them. But they did slaughter everything that was despised and worthless.

Then Samuel said to Saul, "Wait a minute! Let me tell you what the Lord said to me last night." Saul said to him, "Tell me." Samuel said, "Is it not true that when you were insignificant in your own eyes, you became head of the tribes of Israel? The Lord chose you as king over Israel. The Lord sent you on a campaign saying, 'Go and exterminate those sinful Amalekites! Fight against them until you have destroyed them.' Why haven't you obeyed the Lord? Instead you have greedily rushed upon the plunder! You have done what is wrong in the Lord's estimation."

…. Because you have rejected the Lord's orders, he has rejected you from being king."

Then Samuel said, "Bring me King Agag of the Amalekites." Then Samuel hacked Agag to pieces there in Gilgal before the Lord.

For the Israelites in the time of Saul, warfare was an ongoing pursuit – it was an accepted 'fact of life', that kingdoms, cities, and tribes would be at war with each other. There isn't much we can gain regarding "love your neighbour as yourself" from this example. However, how does this teach us love of God?

Ouch. Frankly, this teaches me revulsion of God. It reveals God as a vengeful petty tyrannical despot.

This is a very difficult reading – which is why it was chosen. Let's look a little below the surface though. The Israelites and Amalekites have been sworn enemies for generations. The Israelites attack the Amalekites and destroy everything except the best of their animals and valuables, and the king. Why would Saul decide to keep those?

Maybe he felt sympathy for his fellow King?

Hardly! That would be like Winston Churchill suddenly feeling sympathy for Adolph Hitler.

Maybe he wanted the loot for himself? Maybe he wanted to show the great things they had taken from the hated enemy? Maybe he wanted to present "the best of the spoils" to God in sacrifice?

Your last supposition is what Saul actually claimed. However, Saul would have known that God desired sacrifices which were from what God had provided His people, not foreigners. Saul also would have known that God didn't need sacrifices to satisfy God's ego.

It was common practice for kings in Saul's day (right up to the days of the Roman Emperors) to parade before their people the greatness of vanquished enemies, as a way of saying, 'look how great I am.' When the Babylonians conquered Judah many years after Saul, they took the best of everything (recorded in 2nd Kings, chapters 24 and 25), and captured the Kings of Judah (3 of them in succession actually), gouging out the eyes of the last one who spent most of his days in prison before finally being allowed to eat at the table of the King of Babylon (as an object lesson, I would imagine). So, I sincerely doubt that Saul had Agag's best interests in mind.

You're saying Saul wanted it for his own glory and riches?

That's most probable. Saul was giving a very good example of putting himself before God and before others. If you read the sad story of Saul through, it becomes apparent that Saul was very self-focussed both in his insecurities and his greed. The message is that God rejected Saul from being king because Saul couldn't get beyond himself, even though God was the one who chose him and elevated him to his kingship (i.e., Saul didn't earn it from his own efforts). Likewise, we are to forget (or "die to") ourselves in our life for God through Christ. Don't worry about yourself, rather worry about doing God's will. Self-focus (or selfishness as it is traditionally described – note that this is not the same as self-awareness, which is actually very healthy) leads to despair, while focussing on God and the needs of others leads to life.

What's the "surface reading" then?

Samuel was the judge of Israel as prophet, before Saul came along (Samuel was the one who reluctantly anointed Saul as king, following God's instructions). There was a power struggle between the two, and Samuel won.

Could both types of reading be correct?

Definitely. In fact, many of your actions can have a surface to them (your immediate motivation and the observed results) and a deeper facet (what they say about your relationship with God and how you believe God impacts the world and guides you). Many parts of our lives could even be interpreted as parables, stories with hidden meaning.

What about my comment that this reading reveals God as a vengeful petty tyrannical despot?

We see the clearest revelation of what God is like through the words and actions of Jesus, and I encourage you to read the Bible in that respect. In regard to this reading, I think God was very very sad with the actions of His people.

Where do you wrestle with your own selfishness vs. loving God and loving your neighbour as yourself? What adventures in your own life could you interpret at a deeper level?

Share your answers with others whom you trust.

Day 123: Reading the Bible – serving life

You must not cook a young goat in its mother's milk. (Exodus 23:19, 34:26, 14:21)

Huh? Why not?

This command has confused people for centuries, and there is much debate about it. It is an important command; it shows up three separate times. It is commonly believed to be a prohibition against worshiping things other than God (understanding that this might have been part of a ritual act which involved praying for field fertility). However, let's look at it a little deeper.

Stepping back, what is the purpose that God created mothers' milk for?

To feed their young.

Yes. Yet this command implies that instead of being used to nurture the young goat, the milk in this case was perversely being used in (if not for) its death. Note that it's not saying "don't boil a kid in milk" – it's specific to its *own mother's* milk. You could interpret this to mean God is saying:

"Don't use something I created for life, for death. To do so is repugnant and evil."

What things may we use for death (of our neighbour, of creation, or of ourselves) which were created for life?

Almost anything I suppose. Salt, fertilizers, tools...

Yes. Our use of God-given materials; our words, our actions; everything we do and say can be for life, or for death.

As it says in the letter to the Christian community in Ephesus (chapter 4:29-32):

The one who steals must steal no longer; instead he must labor, doing good with his own hands, so that he will have something to share with the one who has need. You must let no unwholesome word come out of your mouth, but only what is beneficial for the building up of the one in need, that it would give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. You must put away all bitterness, anger, wrath, quarreling, and slanderous talk—indeed all malice. Instead, be kind to one another, compassionate, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ also forgave you.

We are created for life, not death – so let all our actions, all our words, be to serve life and what is healthiest for our neighbour, because that is most pleasing to God.

How can you focus everything in your life so that you serve life, and not death?

Share your answers with others whom you trust.

Day 124: Reading the Bible -- belonging

The Bible is full of genealogies – lists of family trees. Genesis chapters 4,5, 10, 11, 36, and 46; Exodus 6, Numbers 1 and 26, 1st Chronicles 1,7, and 9, Matthew chapter 1 and Luke chapter 3, and others as well -- family lineage was very important. If you say "everyone who is a child of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is 'in'" (as the ancient Israelites did), it's very important to know if you are 'in' or not by listing all your forebears back to them. Family lineage shows belonging.

As you read the family lineages, I suggest you pray to God, thanking Him that you are (or can be) 'in' through believing in Christ, regardless of who your physical parents may be.

How is belonging important to you? How does it feel to know that you belong to God through Christ, no matter your background?

Share your answers with others whom you trust.

Day 125: Reading the Bible – A Fig Tree and a Mountain

Jesus said these things:

"For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit, for each tree is known by its own fruit. For figs are not gathered from thorns, nor are grapes picked from brambles. The good person out of the good treasury of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasury produces evil, for his mouth speaks from what fills his heart." (Luke 6:43-45)

Then Jesus told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the worker who tended the vineyard, 'For three years now, I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and each time I inspect it I find none. Cut it down! Why should it continue to deplete the soil?' But the worker answered him, 'Sir, leave it alone this year too, until I dig around it and put fertilizer on it. Then if it bears fruit next year, very well, but if not, you can cut it down.'" (Luke 13:6-9)

Then Jesus did this thing:

Now the next day, as they went out from Bethany, he was hungry. After noticing in the distance a fig tree with leaves, he went to see if he could find any fruit on it. When he came to it he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. He said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard it.

…. (then Jesus goes into the Temple and performs an act declaring that the time of God's Anointed one had come, to lead people from the Kingdoms of the World to the Kingdom of God (see Day 75))….

In the morning as they passed by, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots. Peter remembered and said to him, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered." Jesus said to them, "Have faith in God. I tell you the truth, if someone says to this mountain, 'Be lifted up and thrown into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him. For this reason, I tell you, whatever you pray and ask for, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. Whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven will also forgive you your sins."

(Mark 11:12-14; 20-25)

On the surface, Jesus had a temper tantrum and the fig tree bore the brunt – which seem rather silly – unless Jesus was acting out something deeper?

In the bible, trees (and mountains) frequently stand in for other things:

- Concepts (knowledge of right and wrong; life) (Genesis 2 and 3)
- Nations (Judges 9)

- People (Luke 6 and Luke 13 (above); Matthew 13, a mustard plant; Psalm 80, Ezekiel 17, a vine)

So… what was Jesus' hunger for?

Figs.

Jesus found a tree with no fruit – which to our eyes makes sense, since it was not the season for fruit. But Jesus cursed the tree and killed it! I suggest the fig tree is a metaphor for the People of God. Jesus is not finding any fruit in them – and He pronounces judgment. He then tells His students that they have the power to do the same thing.

He is trying to say we should judge everyone?

I suggest Jesus is saying, a.) bear fruit, good fruit, in your life; and b.) if you see something not producing fruit, you have the power to influence it. You can say, in effect, 'be transformed into something which produces fruit according to God's will', and, believing in God, see it happen. He cursed the fig tree to draw attention to His disciples that this is a very real promise. Notice how He finishes:

For this reason I tell you, whatever you pray and ask for, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. Whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven will also forgive you your sins."

The fruit is to start in our own lives, through faithfulness to God and forgiveness of others.

How does the church not show the fruit of the Kingdom of God? How does it show it? In other words, where can the church love God better, and love our neighbours and each other better? What can you do (through prayer and action) to bring fruit of the Kingdom of God?

Share your thoughts with others whom you trust.

Day 126: Rest

We come again to the seventh day, so today we rest. Reflect on the past week and care for your needs (body and spirit). In the evening get together with a group you trust and share what you would like to from the previous week – good points, hard points, what you've learned, what you've struggled with, etc. Decide again if you wish to continue journeying together or want to stop.

Know that God loves you.