

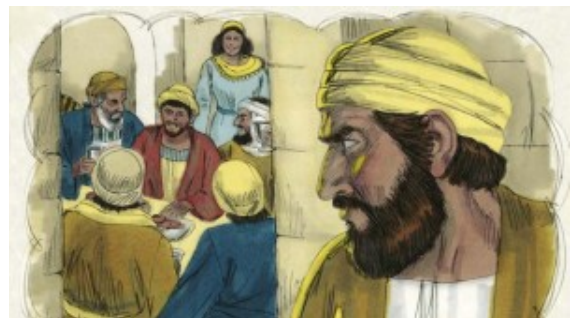
Part 3: The differences that matter

Reading the Bible “faithfully” is not just prayerful, it also respects God’s choices of when and where to reveal Scripture, and the messages God gave. It intends to apply the Bible’s teaching to life today. Last session we began to look closer at how historical situations impact what the Bible says and what it meant.

In this article we’ll think about how the gaps between us and the Bible writers may predispose us to misread and miss the message they intended.

Preunderstandings and the Prodigal Son

Everyone reads Scripture with “preunderstandings”, ideas that we expect to find. When these preunderstandings are shaped by human culture they can warp our Bible reading. For Greenies objecting to plastic packaging, or investors seeking the best return on their money, waste is wrong. Western society has developed a deep aversion to wastefulness. If we bring this common preunderstanding to Jesus’ parable in Luke 15:11ff. we risk focusing on the younger son, and on his wasteful ways.



Picture of Luke 15 CC from SweetPublishing

The traditional name of the story, “The Prodigal Son”, does this (prodigal means wasteful). In contrast to this emphasis, Jesus focused the story on the older brother, the last seven verses are about him. There is also another clue to Jesus’ interest in telling this story, when we look at the audience to whom he told it. We have to look back to v.1-2 to spot it! The way Jesus told the story it was not only about God’s desire to welcome back the “lost”. He focused it on way the Pharisees had themselves become “lost”. Despite their scrupulous obedience of God’s rules, by refusing to welcome the lost brother home they become cut off from the Father.

Using Scripture

If we **use** one of Jesus’ parables to teach something that Jesus did not mean, we are not “faithful” Bible readers. Kevin Vanhozer (an Evangelical teacher of biblical interpretation) says: “*Pride doesn’t listen. It knows.*” To avoid (mis)using Scripture we need to recognise what the writer intended. In some cases like this one it is more complicated, and we have a speaker (Jesus), as well as a writer (Luke) to consider. Noticing the intended meaning is easier if we are aware of (and so suspicious of) what we **expect** to hear. In this case Jesus gives us another strong clue to his intended meaning. He spent the last 1/3 of the parable on the older brother. Luke also gave us a clue, by showing us that Jesus used the story to answer the Pharisees.

Clues to spotting our preunderstandings

Our family experiences provide many preunderstandings, our church experience adds more, Kiwi culture adds more still that we are even less likely to spot. Unless we think carefully, and unless we take care to situate the Bible words in their own context we will merely follow these preunderstandings.

Asking why a Bible passage is “there” (asking what function it serves at this particular point in the unfolding of the book) can help make the author’s intent clearer. Sometimes a more historical and less literary approach helps more. What context was being addressed? What was going on at the time? To whom were these words addressed? And above all: Why? What change did the writer/speaker want to see from their audience?

If we are only hearing messages we expect, then we may only be hearing our preunderstandings confirmed. This should warn us to look again. God’s word often surprises or challenges us, rather than confirming our expectations.

Homework

Jesus instructed: “If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. ” (Luke 6:29) Western readers often assume that this saying is about pacificism, or avoiding conflict. What sort of circumstances do Jesus words bring to your mind?

List them.

Now turn to Job 16:10 and Lam 3:30. Is there a common thread between how these two verses speak of striking on the cheek? (You may need to look at more than one translation to spot it.) What did striking someone’s cheek imply or suggest to the writers of Lamentations and Job? How might this understanding of the meaning of the action change your understanding of how to apply Jesus’ teaching in 21st C NZ?

Discuss this [HERE](#).

Differences that matter, matter

There are huge numbers of differences between us and the writers and first hearers of Scripture. But most of them don't matter most of the time. It's the ones that do matter that really damage our reading.

More on preunderstandings: Rendering unto Caesar

This video also deals with how our expectations (preunderstandings: what we **expect** the passage to be saying) can lead us astray.