

LOOSEN UP

I believe that we do a disservice to Scripture and to ourselves by being overly literal in our interpretations of Scripture.

Jesus from time to time exhibited substantial flexibility in his interpretation of Scripture. On numerous occasions, Jewish religious authorities criticized Jesus for healing on the Sabbath or his disciples from eating on the Sabbath. Jesus demonstrated an exceptional ingenuity in responding to these criticisms. When he was accused of healing on the Sabbath, he reminded the authorities that Scripture permitted untying or unloading an animal on the Sabbath pointing out to his critics that people were much more important than animals. (See Luke 13:10-17). Other verses where Jesus healed on the Sabbath include Mark 3:1-6; Matt. 12:9-14; and Luke 6:6-11.

When Jesus was criticized because his disciples were picking and eating kernels of grain on the Sabbath, Jesus reminded those criticizing that David had taken the showbread from the temple for himself and his men when he was fleeing from Saul. (See Matt. 12:3-4; Mark 2:25-26; Luke 6:3-4). In fact, Jesus reminded all of us that He is Lord of the Sabbath. (See Mark 2:28; Matt. 12:8; Luke 6:5). When you are Lord of the Sabbath, you can make or change rules for the Sabbath.

When it came to Jewish dietary restrictions, Jesus responded to the critics that it was not what went inside of people which polluted them but instead it was the evil which came out of their hearts which made the world unclean. (See Matt. 15:17 and Mark 7:19.) Jesus taught us that there are things much more important than exact compliance with specific dietary laws found in Scripture. The “spirit” of the law is much more important than the “letter” of the law.

Both Jesus and his followers did not always take a literal view of Scripture. For instance the Scribes, who were literalists, said that Elijah would need to come to prepare the way before the Messiah came. A literal interpretation meant that Elijah himself must literally come and prepare the hearts of the people. Jesus took a less literal interpretation at Matthew 11:13 which says:

“Jesus answered and said to them. Indeed Elijah is coming first and will restore all things. But I say to you that Elijah has come already, and they did not know him but did to him whatever they wished. Likewise the Son of Man is also about to suffer at their hands. Then the disciples understood that He spoke to them of John the Baptist.”

Criticisms of Jesus and his work generally originated among the Scribes and Pharisees and those who were “zealous for the law.” These individuals promoted a literal interpretation of Scripture. Instead of always being literal, Jesus was more flexible and willing to look to the principles underlying Scripture. Even when it came to divorce and the ability of the Jewish man to give his wife a bill of divorcement, Jesus pointed out that this right was given by Moses because of the hardness of peoples’ hearts. (See Deut. 24:1; Matt. 5:31; Matt. 19:7 and Mark 10:4). The approach of Jesus did not, however, always end up in making the actions of the individual more permissive. Sometimes, it did just the opposite. Instead of the concept of an actual adulterous act, Jesus taught his hearers that adultery could be done with the eyes and the imagination, not just the body (See Matt. 5:27-28 and Matt. 19:4-6). Murder did not have to be done by an actual killing, but the anger in our hearts was the seed of murder just as lust in the heart was the seed of adultery. (See Matt. 5:21-26).

There were other areas where Scribes and Pharisees took a literal interpretation to attack Jesus. For instance when Jesus was discussing his resurrection he mentioned “tearing down the Temple and raising it up in three days.” Jesus was dealing with the resurrection of his body but the Pharisees and his followers insisted on taking a literal interpretation and took it to mean that Jesus wanted to literally destroy the Temple building. In fact this was one of the arguments used to justify his crucifixion. (See John 2:19-21; Mark 14:58; Matt. 26:60-61 and Acts 6:13-14.)

In my opinion, the genesis of many of the disputes within the Church and our on-going quarrels with science outside the church are a result in our strict literalistic interpretations of Scripture. Literalists protect their interpretations by taking the position that if one has to use his or her judgment as to what is to be taken literally and what is to be taken symbolically, that there is a slippery slope of deceit and pretty soon all Scripture will have holes in it and will be taken in a non-literal manner. However, this is also an argument which one might make about some of the interpretations which Jesus made. Literalists however, red circle Jesus and allow him the latitude to take less than literal positions. They also rely heavily upon the passage in 2 Timothy 3:16 stating that Scripture is “God-breathed” as though it baptized all Scripture into a calcified legalistic reading. Despite utilizing this particular scripture as a club enforcing legalism, those same people are happy to take a more symbolic approach in other verses pointing out that some of the visions of locusts in the Book of Revelation (Rev. 9:3) may in reality be helicopters in end-times battles. Apparently, some literalists can use symbolic views at times of their own choosing in effect using the very judgment which they deny to others who take a less literal interpretation from time to time.

In fact the Christian Church at large has chosen (and correctly so in my opinion) to take a less than literal position on adherence to Jewish dietary restrictions, strict compliance with the Sabbath (Christians rest on Sunday), keeping of Temple Laws, compliance with Jewish feasts and many other laws and ordinances required by the Torah. In short, the church chooses not to be literal when it does not want to and to be literal when it wants to. We take the requirements to rest on the Sabbath demanded by the Torah, and say that either rest can be on another day (preferably Sunday when Christ was raised) or even that the Sabbath rest is when we rest from our own works and depend upon faith in Christ for salvation, which is a very acceptable interpretation in my view.

The fight between literalists and those who took a more liberal view is not new to our generation but also existed in the time in which Jesus lived. Scribes and Pharisees took a strict interpretation of the Torah and other parts of Scripture. They had codified not only what was in the Torah but also had incorporated many oral traditions as to what the Law meant in the Talmud. Jesus on some occasions validated certain approaches taken by the Pharisees such as their view of life after death and resurrection. Paul was a scholar in the Pharisees and a product of one of its greatest teachers Gamaliel. On the other side of the Jewish belief system was the ultra-liberal Sadducees who had been seduced by Hellenism and had even given up beliefs regarding the resurrection and the existence of angels. In short there was a dichotomy between the literalists and the ultra-liberals even in the days of Jesus.

Legalism wraps itself in robes of light and masquerades as a protector of the faith just as the Scribes and Pharisees did in the time of Jesus. Jesus did not mince words regarding their actions. (See Matt. 23:1-36; Luke 12:1).

An interesting verse to consider as we contemplate Scripture is Matthew 5:17-20 which reads as follows:

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota nor a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore whoever relaxes 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.”

In short, Jesus did not see himself as replacing the law and the prophets, but instead as fulfilling and consummating the promises made by the law and the prophets. Indeed Jesus became the Great Lawmaker, one greater than both Moses and Elijah. In fact the Jews believed that Moses was not only the great lawgiver but was also the greatest prophet who had ever lived. (Deut. 34:10). Moses received the law from God and yet it was Jesus who went up to the mountains and taught the Teachings on the Mount that we know as the “Beatitudes”. For instance Jesus said, *“You have heard that it was said to those of old, You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment. But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment.”* (Matt. 5:21). The words of Jesus “completed” the law given to Israel through Moses.

Never was the superiority of Jesus over the law and the prophets been seen more clearly than the appearance of Moses and Elijah and Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. The Laws of God instead of being inscribed on stone in the time of Moses are now inscribed on the tablets of our heart. Moses only led the Israelites out of the harsh bondage of Pharaoh whereas Jesus led the people of God out of the bondage of sin and death. Moses could only lead the people of Israel up to the Promised Land whereas it was up to Joshua (Jesus) to lead them into the Promised Land. Jesus Christ leads his people into victory over death and into the Kingdom of God. In short, Jesus is both the completion and fulfillment of the law and the promises just as He said in Matt. 5:17-20 quoted above.

Further, the early church did not always take things literally. When faced with the question of whether Gentiles should be included in the church without strict compliance with Jewish law, James took a less than literalistic approach to the question of Gentiles entering after quoting Amos 9:11:

*“After this I will return
And I will rebuild the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down;
I will rebuild its ruins,
And I will set it up;
So that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord,
Even all the Gentiles who are called by My name,
Says the Lord who does all these things.”*

Certainly James did not take a literalistic view but saw the “Tabernacle of David” as being the whole church of God including both Jews and Gentiles. He certainly did not see it as rebuilding a literal tabernacle.

I believe that overly literalistic positions regarding Scripture have resulted in many arguments about creation, end-times, scientific matters and in dealing with what I might call apparent contradictions in Scripture. If Jesus says on one occasion, that those who are not with us are against us and on another that those who are not against us are with us, the theologian will move heaven and earth to resolve the apparent conflict between these two statements. (See Mark 9:40 and Matt. 12:30).

Further, those who cloak a legalistic view of Scripture under the rubric of “infallibility” often find that they are met with innumerable challenges such as determining whether infallibility runs to doctrine or alternatively to doctrinal, historical and scientific matters. “Infallibility” on more than one occasion has been used to prove that the earth is flat and that the sun and heavens revolve around the earth. In short, excessive literalism can result in persecution to scientists such as Copernicus, Galileo and others much to the embarrassment of the church. Further, hurdles include dealing with the numerous divergent translations and editions of the Bible and generally ends with the conclusion that the Bible is infallible **in the original autographs**. Unfortunately, we don’t have an original autograph of any book in the Old or New Testaments, but the argument goes that if we had such a book then it would be infallible. To me, this is reminiscent of the medieval discussion of how many angels can dance on the head of a pin and at the end of the discussion learning that the pin is missing.

One would think that those who believe in a higher view of Scripture and its inspiration (and I believe that I fall into that category) would take a more uplifted view of the importance of knowing and applying Scripture to our lives. If we truly esteem the word of God and believe that it in one fashion or another is the true word of God then we would do such things as :

- Spend more time in the Word;
- Fear the Word of God and take it seriously;
- Would know the Word of God better; and
- Would be more careful to practice and obey the Word of God.

Jesus had a similar experience when he asked the Jews at John 7:19: *“Did not Moses give you the law, yet none of you keep the law.”* In short we claim that it is the Word of God and that it is without error and yet fail to honor and obey it .

I recognize that this short essay may cause some consternation. Personally, I take a very conservative approach to Scripture in the vast majority of cases. We need to be open to the plain meaning of Scripture and like Jesus not always take a literal view of matters, for instance, like prohibitions of activities on the Sabbath such as healing. Instead, we should embrace the position of Jesus that the Sabbath was made for man rather than a more legalistic approach that man was made for the Sabbath. (Mark 2:27). Moreover, I think that it is important to keep in mind that Jesus did not always take a literalistic view of Scripture. That view was much more likely to be taken by the Scribes and Pharisees. At the same time, Jesus was nowhere near the views of the liberals of his time, who were the Sadducees. Regarding these views he said *“You do err not knowing the Scriptures, nor the power of God.”* (Matt. 22:29).

It seems to me that if we are too strict and confining with Scripture, we are, in effect, constricting Scripture to the position where there is no room for the Spirit to breathe through it. We take the living word and bind it with the bandages of death, embalming it rather than giving the word the freedom to breath with the Spirit of God. We mummify it, and as a result, become ourselves mummified and bound in the bondage of legalism and Pharisaicalism. In trying to protect God’s word, which in reality is protected by God himself, we find that the cure for the slippery slope of ultra-liberalism can be as bad as the disease itself.