

“Jesus’ Bible”
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For almost 700 years, Scandinavian kings, writers, historians, and travelers stood mesmerized before a tablet that all believed to possess the faded runes of ancient Norsemen. Some believed Runamo, as it came to be known, was an epic poem; others, that it was a memorial to the heroic deeds of a Danish king. But ultimately, no one was able to decipher the mysterious, coded message of the past. Scholars devoted lifetimes to trying to understand its meaning. At least they did until a Swedish scientist conducted his own examination in 1836 and revealed why this one inscription had thwarted the greatest minds of Scandinavia—they weren’t runes at all; they were cracks in a rock. Just some random fissures in a stone that someone more than half a millennium ago found lying in a field and decided it looked like poetry.

Sometimes we get it wrong.

Maybe Jesus did too. In his famous Sermon on the Mount, a portion of which you’ve just heard, Jesus appears to make a mistake. He declares, “You have heard it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ ” But that’s wrong. Leviticus 19 does tell you to love your neighbor, but it says nothing about hating your enemy, a phrase that in fact appears nowhere in all of the Hebrew Bible and subsequent rabbinic literature.

Certainly, Israel did contend with many enemies throughout its history, and the Psalms and prophetic books in particular are replete with violent language against enemies. But never once does Moses or any other teacher of the Law advocate hate.

Maybe Jesus should have prepared a little more before preaching!

Either that, or Jesus isn’t quoting Scripture at all. He’s quoting what other preachers have said about Scripture. He’s citing a popular misinterpretation.

If that’s the case, what he does next will open to us a road map for how we too should engage Scripture and its common misinterpretations.

When Jesus says, “You have heard it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy,’ but I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,” Jesus wasn’t offering a new Law or Bible; he was trying to help people understand what their old Bible was already saying.

The first century, during which Jesus lived, was rife with debate over what the Hebrew Scripture, the *Tanakh*, really meant. The first five books—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy—were known as the Torah, the Law, and were written down after the Jews returned from exile, about 500 years before Jesus was born.

It's to this text that Jesus returns.

What he finds is not a text about separating insiders from outsiders, friends from enemies, but a holy word that seeks to bind together all of God's children. It's about relationships. It's about how caring for others is how we model God's holiness (or in Jesus' word, "perfection").

Later, Jesus will teach that the central message of the Law, including Leviticus, is love—of God and of neighbor. And the Law stretches that love far. In just the few verses we heard earlier, Leviticus stretches that love to include the poor and the laborer, the stranger and the foreigner, the deaf and the blind.

It commands those who have plenty to share with those who have little. It commands that we engage one another honestly and refrain from theft and fraud. It commands a living wage for laborers and respect for people with disabilities. It commands love and forgiveness.

In this same chapter, it is written, "When a foreigner resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the foreigner. The foreigner who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the foreigner as yourself, for you were foreigners in the land of Egypt" (19:33-34).

This is Jesus' Bible.

It's *this* Bible that he wants his listeners to reencounter. But even so—even as far as Leviticus stretches love—it doesn't go far enough. Jesus' task is not complete. Once he knows what the Bible actually says, he has to question whether it is true to God's Word.

Jesus seems to imply that there's a reason this text has given rise to so many misinterpretations. Though it has a beautiful vision of caring for the other, it is nonetheless restrained by the limitations of its own parochial mindset—its context. It limits "neighbor" to "kin," to the friend at the marketplace, or at worship, or at school, or in the fields. "Neighbor" does not include the enemy standing across from you on the battlefield. It does not include the one who persecutes you. It does not include the foreigner who rejects your religion and espouses their own. The text certainly does not call on you to hate this person, but nor does it call on you to love them.

Jesus demands more. He pushes past these limits and reclaims what he believes to be the original divine vision behind the veil of these very human words.

Love must have no limit, Jesus says. No boundary. Because that is the nature of God's love.

This is important, because while we are surely pained by the many misinterpretations of Scripture, and often stand equally confused before this ancient and foreign document, what hurts the most is when Scripture itself lets us down. When it accepts slavery, endorses genocide, embraces the oppression of women, degrades the body, or paints Jesus as a sword-wielding avenger.

Sometimes we misinterpret the Bible. But sometimes its word just isn't good enough.

For that reason, God has given us Christ, the Living Word, who is known to us through the help of the Holy Spirit, that great teacher who inspires us through our intellect, intuition, and collective experiences to discover the deeper truths of Scripture.

Jesus has shown us the way. He has shown us how we too can engage the Bible: first, look at what the text actually says and dispel misinterpretations and their agendas; next, sit with the text, read it over and over again until you understand its heart, its core message; then, acknowledge and study its contextual limits; finally, consult the character of God, which is love, and allow the text before you to blossom, to grow into what it was always meant to be but couldn't at the time.

Of course, we're not Jesus, so we're going to need each other, a strong mix of moxie and humility, and the help of the Holy Spirit.

To help us, there are many ways to pray with Scripture. One very old form is known as *Lectio Divina*, "Holy Reading." It dates all the way back to the 12th century.

First, you go to a quiet place, where you can silence all the other noises and voices competing for your attention. There you read aloud the word of God, slowly, allowing the words to sink into your heart. Read it several times. Linger over words and cadences. Hear it as if you are hearing it for the first time. It need be no more than a few verses, but you will want to also read what comes before and after the passage you've selected, so that you have a better understanding of its context.

Next, find a word or phrase that stood out to you. Reflect on it. Repeat it over and over. Savor it. Visualize it. Think about what God wants to give you through this word or phrase.

Next, respond. Let your heart speak to God. If you need to debate or argue, go ahead. Scripture is meant to be wrestled with. Share with God what this passage triggers in you. Note what you are feeling and offer that up to God.

Finally, rest. Clear your mind of all ideas and interpretations, all plans and intentions, even the words of Scripture. Listen for the still, small voice of God. Sit in the silence. Don't rush. It's in this space that you are allowing God to respond to you.

I know that it may feel daunting, even impossible, to come to a holy understanding of the Bible. But the Bible reminds us that when you spend time with God and God's word, you grow to be like God and God's word (cf. Sheldon Sorge). The author of Proverbs writes, "Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise" (13:20), and the Psalmist reminds us that we become like what we worship (115:8).

So, if we worship a wise and loving God, if we gather here each Sunday, and if we gather each day with Scripture, even when we don't understand it, we will become more and more like that with which we keep company. Christ will grow in us, and we shall find the courage to wrestle with Scripture as Jesus once did, and in the process, be made holy. **Amen.**