

Interpretation and Application

Dear Friends,

I chose Jesus' parable/story of the "Good Samaritan" to illustrate the need in a serious study of Scripture to identify the correct interpretation of a passage, as well as its wise and correct application to our lives. By His choice of characters, Jesus created immense tension in the story. The two men who depicted moral failure in the lesson were Levites and therefore highly respected by the lawyer, the man to whom Jesus taught the lesson. And the "Hero" of the story was a Samaritan, likely the most despised of all cultures among religious Jews of the day.

I tried to pose a moral dilemma from our current world for you to ponder. The dilemma is a challenge. To be painfully honest, I have more questions than answers. And every time I see a homeless person I ponder again. The homeless population of our time and culture is such a mixed bag. Represented in it are truly destitute people who need our help, but the class also includes people who would take anything you give them and use it to buy drugs or alcohol. How do you know the difference? Jesus didn't teach this lesson to prompt us to enable sinful and self-destructive bad habits in the homeless people we see. Perhaps the best I can do in this writing is nudge each of us to ponder how we should apply Jesus' teaching in this lesson to this very real situation that we likely witness almost every time we go into a public place, especially if we live in or near a large city. Wrestle with the dilemma. At least, do not allow the problem to drive us into callous indifference to Jesus' teaching in the lesson.

Lord bless,
Joe Holder

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But he, willing to justify himself, said unto Jesus, And who is my neighbour? And Jesus answering said, A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, which stripped him of his raiment, and wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead. And by chance there came down a certain priest that way: and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. And likewise a Levite, when he was at the place, came and looked on him, and passed by on the other side. But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was: and when he saw him, he had compassion on him, And went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. And on the morrow when he departed, he took out two pence, and gave them to the host, and said unto him, Take care of him; and whatsoever thou spendest more, when I come again, I will repay thee. Which now of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbour unto him that fell among the thieves? And he said, He that shewed mercy on him. Then said Jesus unto him, Go, and do thou likewise. (Luke 10:29-37 KJV 1900)

Wise Bible study involves many factors, beginning with prayer and a faithful commitment to our fellowship with the Lord. However, the wise conclusion of a study of any passage requires at least two objectives. 1) We should study to discover the right and contextual lesson the Holy Spirit intended the

passage to teach, a sound “Interpretation” of the passage. 2) We need to ponder how the passage, rightly interpreted, applies to ourselves and to other believers in our present walk and life, a sound “Application” of the passage. Based on that sound interpretation, how do the principles taught apply to my daily life? What impact should it have on my lifestyle, my “Faith-walk”?

Interpretation

In the lesson above, a very religious man, described in the context as a “lawyer,” a serious student of Moses’ law, approached Jesus with a question more focused on his thoughts for his eternal future than his personal conduct in the here and now. Jesus gently redirects his mind to his conduct in the here and now. When Jesus affirmed the man’s response of the Ten Commandments, the man reveals his self-righteous attitude (“...willing to justify himself”) with yet another question, “And who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29 KJV) Jesus used this question to teach the man a lesson that he—no less than we—truly needed to know and to practice.

Jesus created the parables and stories He told in the gospels to teach His truth. He gave them all the details necessary to simply and clearly teach what He intended to teach. We need no additional details not included in the stories He told. Don’t waste your mental energy chasing your own imagination in pursuit of supposed details that Jesus didn’t include in His stories. He gave us every detail we need to learn the lessons He intended. If we think we need more details than He included, we are likely chasing a meaning that differs from the lesson He intended.

In the story Jesus told this man, we see four main characters, 1) a man who was robbed, beaten, and left on the roadside for dead, 2) two professional, supposedly very religious Jewish men, a priest (By Mosaic protocol, a Levite) and a “Levite,” 3) and a Samaritan. First century Jews despised Gentiles, but they likely despised Samaritans even more. Jesus chose the most objectionable character imaginable for this lawyer as the “Hero” in this story, and He also chose two Jewish characters who, by their position, should have been most compassionate as the two disappointments in the story. Based on the lawyer’s understanding of Jesus’ story, of the three men who walked by the wounded man, which of them was a true “Neighbor” to the man?

The logical and moral answer was obvious, in fact undeniable. However, for this lawyer with his cultural bias, to admit anything good in a Samaritan may have been one of the most painful answers he ever had to give to a question. And Jesus added salt to the man’s wounded ego when He told him, “**Go, and do thou likewise.**” Tell a first century Jewish lawyer to imitate a Samaritan! Whatever the lawyer’s emotional reaction to Jesus’ lesson, he needed to learn that lesson. So do we.

Application

How might you and I apply the principle that Jesus taught the lawyer to our own life? Let me give you a personal dilemma that my wife and I occasionally discuss. To be honest, we always end up wrestling with the principle and struggling for a wise answer.

Most large cities in our country face the problem of a growing “Homeless” population. Each homeless person likely has his/her own story. There is no single reason. Some of these people may be homeless because they lost their job, have no family, and have no financial alternative, at least no obvious alternative in their mind. Others have serious mental illnesses. Until I was a young adult, our country funded dedicated mental institutions for people who had a long-term, often incurable mental illness. They gave these people a safe environment and the best treatment available at the time for their illness. As I recall, a court decision ruled that these institutions deprived their patients of their civil rights, so they all closed their doors. What happened to those incurable mentally ill patients? Many of them became an early beginning of the “Homeless” community. And this is supposedly better for them? Based on news publications and on multiple personal observations, we may also add drug addicts to this growing homeless population. And how many other categories are represented in that population?

Regardless their theological persuasion, most professing Christian people have tender hearts and care for the difficulties of other people. If we can help, we want to do so. When you walk along a street and see a homeless person sitting beside the street, how do you react? Ignore the person? Give them some money and hope they will use it to buy food? So often compassionate godly people give money to a homeless person, hoping they will use it to buy food, but the person instead uses the money to buy alcohol or drugs. Would you give—would you be morally obligated to give based on Jesus’ “Good Samaritan” lesson—to that homeless person if you knew they would use it for alcohol or drugs? I think not, but how do you know?

To be compassionate without unwittingly feeding bad habits, many Christian people have adopted a wise alternative. Instead of giving the person money, offer to take them to the nearest restaurant or fast-food place and buy them a meal. I recall several years ago, as I was leaving my bank, I noticed a homeless man standing beside the sidewalk outside the bank, asking people for money. A very nicely dressed lady met the man before I and engaged him in a kind, soft-spoken conversation. She explained to him that she could not, in good conscience, give him money, but she would gladly walk with him to the next-door I-Hop and buy him a meal. He gratefully accepted her offer! I left the parking lot deeply respecting and admiring that kind woman’s wisdom. We may encounter a homeless person in an area where no food establishment is nearby. Most of us who encounter these people with growing regularity are familiar with that tug at our heart. What is this person’s story? Is he/she in this condition by circumstances out of their control? If we give them money, will they use it for food or shelter? Or will they use it to feed a bad habit?

What is a sincere and compassionate believer to do in such situations? You want to help, but you don’t want to enable bad habits. Where is the answer? To be painfully honest, I have more questions than answers to this dilemma.

The church I serve in the City of Bellflower, California has struggled with this problem for many years. Although we never gave from the church’s funds, early in this season any one of us who happened to greet and talk with a passer-by who asked for money would open our wallet and give them a few dollars for food. After we gave a man some money and a few minutes later drove past the neighborhood liquor store and saw the man with an open bottle in his hand, we decided that money was not the wise response. The ladies bought a variety of canned goods and put them in a convenient place in the church kitchen cabinet. On several occasions, we explained to the person that we do not give money, but we had some food that we would gladly give them. A few people accepted our offer and took the food we gave them. Others were incensed and stormed away. On one occasion my wife took a young mother and her baby to the store, walked the aisles with her, and paid for what she needed.

The challenge is real, and it stretches the wise grace of the most mature and caring of believers. However we respond, Jesus' lesson to the lawyer is a needed lesson to us as well. ***Who is my neighbor?*** And Jesus' answer is the same now as in His story. My neighbor is anyone I meet who is in a needy situation. We might possibly qualify the need as caused by something or someone out of that person's personal control, based on the man who found himself wounded and helpless because of robbers. What do you think? Living our lives in this modern world according to Jesus, truly "Applying" His teachings to the world where we live every day, is a real challenge. Whatever we choose to try to make a difference for the better, Jesus' lesson is our wisest and best guide.

Our church is located across the street from a home for mentally ill patients with very limited financial resources. Over the years a significant number of patients from the facility have visited our meetings. We had one patient who was a physical threat to our people, and we've had a few people who were too out of touch to grasp what church was about. However, we have been blessed by a significant number of patients who spent their lives in various denominations, and they were hungry for worship and contact with Christian people. They attended, several of them for a number of years. I deeply respect and appreciate the grace with which our members have welcomed these guests; they have been "Good Samaritans" to them. And our guests have, in turn, blessed us. Blessings come in many shapes and forms. Welcome the blessing regardless the shape or form in which it comes. You shall learn the joy of Jesus' words to the lawyer, "***Go and do thou likewise.***"

Elder Joe Holder