

Bite Size Bible Study

Interpreting the Bible #206

By Pastor Lee

Interpreting the Bible is a difficult task. We bring our past, our preconceived notions, our already formed theology, our cultural blind spots, our social standing, our gender, our political views, and many other influences to our interpretation of the Bible.

All of these things contribute to our assumption that we know exactly what the Bible is saying to us. Everything that we are in some way determines how we interpret not only the Bible but everything else. This does not imply that the meaning of the text is dependent on its reader. The meaning remains constant. But our understanding of the text does differ and is dependent on many factors surrounding the interpretive process. In other words, how a reader or listener understands the text can differ greatly from person to person.

One of the biggest handicaps in Bible interpretation has been an inability to recognize and admit that a particular interpretation may have a weak spot. The weak spot is usually determined by personal preferences and heartfelt desires to prove our particular theology, regardless of the cost. This weak spot is present not only in us, the lay people, but also in the scholars who have the problem as well. We are often constrained by the same desire to “prove” from the scriptures, a particular theology. In other words, to make the Bible prove what we think we know.

But if we acknowledge that we may have our own blind spots and are honestly willing to admit problems with our interpretations when they exist, we may find that the Scriptures have more to tell us than we originally thought. This is more important than intellectual brilliance.

One opportunity to exercise an honest approach is when we or the commentators recognize that there is something in our interpretation that does not seem to fit with the rest of the scriptural text. Often when we come to that point, and we don't quite know how to explain it we tend to skip over the problem.

In the story of the Samaritan woman there is a point where most of us insert what we have been taught into the understanding of the scripture. Although the text is neutral, we have been taught to assume the negative interpretation, but there is a positive way to assume what the text is saying.

He told her, “Go, call your husband and come back.” “I have no husband,” she replied.

Jesus said to her, “You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true.”

John 4:16-18 NIV

Nothing is stated that she a fallen woman and Jesus doesn't call her out for sinning. We in our culture have just made the assumption that because she has had 5 husbands and is now living with another man that she is a promiscuous woman. We have assumed a negative interpretation without any proof.

Since we are assuming anyway, what if we assume a positive scenario? Could she have lost 5 husbands through their deaths? And could the man she is living with be a relative?

Anyone who has lost a person close to them, knows the pain, depression, and self-doubt that comes with these events. Maybe this woman has been through this several times. This is not too impossible because life in those times was hard and life expectancy was much shorter than today. This woman may have experienced this loss five times over. Her self-worth is probably about as low as it could be. Depression probably rules (or ruins) her daily life.

Maybe Jesus is not speaking to her about her sins but relating to her depression and hurt. Compassion rather than judgement – Grace rather than condemnation. This is the Jesus that I have grown to know, love and follow.

We are so preconditioned to think in the Christian terms of “we are all fallen people, but especially the Samaritan woman” kind of approach, that we are unable to read this scripture positively. In other words, *everything I ever did*, may be just that - a simple statement that the entire life of this woman was known to Jesus (not necessarily a life of sexual immorality). In other words, this verse should probably be understood differently – “he knows and understands everything about me.” Indeed, she would hardly have gone bragging to the townspeople that “this stranger told me all the sinful acts I have done in my life.” When we think about it, that would hardly have sent them running to meet Jesus, but rather sent them running in the other direction!

I realize that getting over preconceived notions and interpretive preconditioning is not easy, but the effort is definitely worth it.

It was Krister Stendahl who said,
“Our vision is often more abstracted by what we think we know than by our lack of knowledge.”

Concept is from a book:
“The Jewish Gospel of John”
by Eli Lizonkin-Eyzenberg page 64