

**“A More Nuanced Way of Reading Scripture”**  
**Jeremiah 17:5–10; Psalm:1–6; Luke 6:17–26**  
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We often read scripture like we watch an old western or crime drama. When there are contrasts, like there are in today’s texts, there is right and wrong, and we want to be on the side of right. There are good guys (and gals) and bad guys (and gals), and we identify with the good. We separate the sheep from the goats — that’s biblical, after all — we cheer for one side and boo for the other, and we may even shout, “Huzzah!” which means, “Yes!” but also, “Well done!” and “Do it again!”

In the language of our texts, let the righteous who have put down roots near streams of water flourish! May those who trust in God be blessed! May the poor and hungry, the grieving and persecuted be lifted up! And may the rich and satisfied, those who laugh and receive praise be brought down! The world — of scripture and today — can be neatly separated into two categories, and the key lies in figuring out which category is the good one and making sure we are in it.

I say all of this tongue-in-cheek because it is more complicated than this, scripture is more complicated than this, life is more complicated than this. And so, we need a more nuanced way of reading scripture, one that accounts for the obvious questions and arguments that arise when we pay attention to what certain texts say. For example, when the psalmist says the righteous prosper and the wicked perish, how does he keep a straight face? In what world does that happen?

We need a way of reading scripture that addresses the questions that arise and one that allows us to examine our hearts and lives more carefully rather than constantly trying to divide the world into categories of us and them. We need a more nuanced way of reading scripture.

Consider the contrasts presented in Psalm 1. Those who follow the advice of the wicked perish while those who meditate on God’s law prosper. There are wicked and righteous people who experience bad and good things.

But which are we — the wicked or the righteous — and how do we define these terms?

We might say that the righteous follow the teachings of scripture, but which teachings and understood in what way? Some focus on matters of personal morality, often viewed through a cultural lens, while others focus on matters of social concern. So, depending on your perspective, wickedness might be linked to drinking or abortion or it might be linked to racism and the separation of immigrant families.

But there is another matter that renders simplistic interpretation unhelpful here. It's not usually a matter of there being righteous and wicked people but of all of us having the potential for righteousness and wickedness. Maybe we don't like the term "wicked" — though I have been called worse — but do we not all struggle at times to do the right thing, even when we understand what it is?

In Romans 7, the Apostle Paul says he struggles in this way, often doing the very thing he does not want to do and not doing the thing he wants to do. Rather than viewing scripture as a lens through which to view the wrongs of others, a weapon of judgment, we are better off allowing scripture to open a window into our hearts and lives so that we might find a path toward growth.

Consider the parable Jesus tells in Luke 18:9-14 about two men who go up to the temple to pray — a Pharisee and a tax collector. The would-be righteous man condescendingly thanks God that he is not like this sinner, while the would-be sinner simply acknowledges his condition and asks God for mercy. As we know, Jesus says the "sinner" is the one who goes home justified because he has humbled himself. Our perceptions of righteousness do not always match God's.

But the challenge in reading this psalm and the other texts is tied not only to the reality that we don't have neat definitions of good and evil or dependable ways to separate them, but also to the reality that the rewards and punishments of good and evil aren't clear-cut. The psalmist says the righteous prosper and the wicked perish, and Jeremiah says those who trust in God are blessed while those who trust in mere mortals are cursed, but it doesn't always work this way.

Some of the finest people we know suffer with debilitating illnesses or tragic accidents and die while some of the most hateful, vindictive, dishonest people we know seem to have everything go their way and never pay a price for their evil actions. Even scripture — for example the book of Job — presents a counternarrative to the dominant biblical narrative of the righteous being rewarded for their trust. In our reading from Luke, Jesus speaks of a reversal of fortune very much like his mother Mary sings of when he is born wherein the hungry will be filled and the rich will experience woe, but when will this happen?

One answer is — if not in this life, in the next one. God’s ultimate purposes cannot be thwarted. But how does this help us in this life? Another answer is that the rewards of faithfulness do not take the form of secular currency. The rewards of faithfulness are spiritual. Perhaps most accurately, the reward of faithfulness is faithfulness, living in the way God intends. I have shared with some of you before the old story about a father telling the wide-eyed suitor of his daughter that whoever marries her will get a great prize. “Well,” said the foolish young man, “And what exactly would that be?”

The prize is the daughter. The reward of faithfulness is faithfulness. But it takes a bit of reflection along with some life experience to get this. There are plenty of people today who believe in a gospel of prosperity wherein the righteous are directly rewarded with health, wealth and success. There are plenty of ministers and churches that teach this offensive nonsense. It is an insult to the great saints of this world who suffer and to the one whose faithfulness was rewarded with death on a cross. Trusting in God has its reward, but we need a more nuanced reading of the text to understand what this reward is and is not.

Our reading from Jeremiah raises another complexity that requires attention. The prophet says that those who trust in mere mortals are cursed while those who trust in God are blessed. He seems to assume that there is a clear binary choice. We place our trust in one place or the other. The context is ancient Judah’s attempt to form an alliance with Egypt in order to win a war against the Babylonians, which on a practical level might make sense. But Jeremiah’s claim is that the nation is in danger because God has removed protection from them, and God has done this is because the people have been

unfaithful. Turning to other people in another nation of another faith does nothing to restore relationship with God. In fact, it makes matters worse. They are placing their trust elsewhere. They will be cursed like shrubs in a desert.

With a little background, Jeremiah's message makes sense, but what is the message for us? Is there always a binary choice between trusting people and trusting God? Does this mean the people who say they don't need a vaccine for COVID because their faith will protect them are right? Are all political and military alliances inappropriate? For example, during World War II, should we have all gone our own way, even if this meant Hitler would have won? Does genuine faith mean that true believers have no agency at all in this world?

I doubt there are many people in this room who believe any of these things. But what do we do with the seemingly noble teaching of this text — trust God and not people? Do we just ignore it? Do we say it only applies to a time long ago? Or do we perhaps say that our ultimate trust should be in God, but this does not always preclude human trust?

We do trust other people all the time, whether we realize it or not. We trust engineers and mechanics every time we get behind the wheel of a car, not to mention traffic engineers and operators who design and manage traffic lights, and — yes, we must be crazy — other drivers! We trust airline designers, manufacturers, mechanics, pilots and air traffic controllers every time we get on a plane. We trust medical science with all of its advances — vaccines, antibiotics, cancer treatments, diagnostic tests and various procedures. If we did not, many of us would not be alive today. We trust anyone we love with our hearts and souls.

We don't view any of this to be a violation of our faith. The choices are not always binary. Sometimes God works through the gifts God has given us, including our minds and ability to adapt to the world in which we live.

Most of us have heard some form of an old joke in which a man stranded on an island prays to God for help. A boat comes by and offers to rescue him, but the man says God is going to help him. A helicopter and a plane fly close enough to see him and circle back, offering help, but each time, he insists that he has asked God for help and will wait for it. Days, weeks and months go by and no help arrives. So, he complains to God — I asked for help and trusted in

you, but you never came! “What are you taking about?” God says, “I sent you a boat, a helicopter and a plane, and you refused every offer of help I sent!”

Trust is not always a binary choice. Why would we think that God has to work outside the scope of normal life, external to the world God has created? Jeremiah’s concern is with where we place our ultimate trust, we get that. We need to place that trust not in earthly ideas, powers and authorities, not in either political party or any ideology, but in the one reality that endures all of the change around us — God. But this doesn’t mean there is no wisdom in this world nor does it mean that God cannot work through the details of life and the people around us.

This may seem obvious to many of us, but it requires a more nuanced approach to reading scripture and viewing life. Even Jesus’ words of blessing and woe require a bit of careful reflection. Is he saying that it is better to be poor and hungry and consumed by grief, that it is inherently evil to be happy or to have acquired anything? Or is he saying that God intends good for all, and thus, there has to be a way of addressing the gaps in wealth, education and life experience in this world, which to this day are still increasing?

Scripture is a sacred gift, manna from heaven to feed our souls, the river of life to quench our parched spirits, but we need to know how to take in this nourishment and not just devour it hurriedly like one of our German Shepherds woofing down a meal. The goal is stated well in today’s anthem text. “Day by day, dear Lord, three things I pray: to see thee more clearly, love thee more dearly, follow thee more nearly, day by day.” It is a clear and simple goal. It just takes a little discernment to make sure we are actually pursuing it.