

“Interpretation Is Required”
Matthew 10:24–39
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“The Bible says it, I believe it, and that settles it.” We have all heard this claim many hold dear, and it sounds pious. The trouble is the Bible says many things, often contradictory things about the same subject. For example, Ephesians 2:8 says we are saved by grace and grace alone, but James 2:17 says faith without works is dead. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says anyone who calls a sister or brother a fool is liable to the hell of fire (Matthew 5:22) and then he proceeds to call the Pharisees fools, among other things (Matthew 23:17). Parts of the New Testament seem to indicate that when we die, we are immediately with God in eternity while other parts speak of a future day of resurrection when the trumpet will sound and the dead will be raised.

The Bible says many things about many subjects, and in truth, very little or absolutely nothing about some of the subjects that people are most energized about and most certain as to what the Bible teaches. As a result, interpretation is required. Some people say they take scripture literally, they don’t interpret, but everyone interprets. As our own beloved Elmo Scoggin used to say, every translation is an interpretation, and then we choose which passages to emphasize and how to read them.

Everyone interprets scripture and how we do so matters. Consider the actions of the Southern Baptist Convention a couple weeks ago to exclude women from leadership... yet again. They have been demeaning women for some time, and they have tried to do this before, failing on the required second vote, but Al Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, made the motion which passed requiring the expulsion of any church that acts to “affirm, appoint, or endorse a woman serving in the office or function of a pastor/elder/overseer, specifically preaching to the assembled congregation.”

It is yet another reminder of why we left the SBC decades ago and why even thinking about my MDiv alma mater makes me physically ill. How can people living in 2026 believe that women are inferior and thus unworthy of

leadership in the church? There are many issues about which we might ask this question, but here at least part of the answer lies in a certain interpretation of scripture, a kind of selective literalism.

In 1 Corinthians 14:34f, the Apostle Paul says that women should be silent in churches. They are not permitted to speak but should be subordinate, as the law says. If there is anything they want to know, they can ask their husbands at home. The Bible says it, I believe it, and that settles it... But this is not all the Bible says. In 1 Corinthians 11:5, presumably the same Apostle Paul, writing to the same church, says that when a woman prophesies — a technical term for preaching — she should cover her head. How can she preach if she is not allowed to speak? And what do we do with the tension created by these two verses from the same book, not to mention other passages which speak to this subject?

We have to interpret in some way, the best of which is to employ consistent principles or hermeneutics. We seek to understand a text in its context, then consider all other related texts, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and in the framework of a community of fellow believers who either confirm or contest our interpretation.

When we do all this in regard to scripture's take on the role of women, as opposed to practicing selective literalism, taking literally verses that support our perspective and ignoring others, we end up with a very different view, one that values the role of women. But the bottom line is that everyone interprets scripture, whether they acknowledge it or not, and so how we go about interpretation matters.

The passage we have read today from Matthew 10 illustrates this reality. In fact, this passage cries out for interpretation. In it, Jesus says he has not come to bring peace to the earth but rather a sword. He has come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law (not that Jesus gets all the credit for that), and one's foes will be members of one's own household. It doesn't sound very family friendly, though there aren't many of Jesus' teachings that do. But why in the world would we read this text on Father's Day? Indeed, why is it the Bible at all?

Commenting on this text, Presbyterian pastor William Goettler says his mother-in-law, a faithful Christian woman who attended Mass daily, asked this very question (*Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 3, p. 164). She knew Christian life involved struggle and Jesus' teaching was often challenging, but in this passage, he went too far. Jesus came to bring peace, not a sword, and he never would have encouraged this sort of division in the family. How did this ever get in the Bible?

Some interpretation seems necessary. What is Jesus saying here? Mostly that loyalty to him matters more than anything else, even family. It's not that he wants to divide families. It's just that in his time when a person declares loyalty to him and follows his teaching, this often creates conflict with family members who neither choose to become his disciples nor think that doing so is a good thing.

Christianity grows out of Judaism in the context of Roman culture that is at best tolerant of and at worst hostile toward the faith traditions of conquered people. There is tension within the Jewish community because of this emerging new form of faith and with the larger culture. It's just a fact of life that when someone chooses this radically new path, they will be at odds with some of the people closest to them.

It may seem like something that is no longer an issue, but it is for many people. For those who become Christian in cultures where Christianity is a minority faith, there can be significant tension not just with oppressive governments but with family members – in Pakistan, Afghanistan; even in Japan where Christianity is a minority faith. But many people in this culture face conflict in families over faith too. For some, it's about having different perspectives on certain issues or even different views of Jesus. For others, it's taking part in the church at all.

My family had given up on the church, for reasons I understand — the church's subjugation of women, its opposition to integration, its rejection of other faith traditions. So, when I started attending church as a teenager, my involvement was met with skepticism. But when I felt a call to ministry, I was told by more than one family member, "I had hoped you would do something useful with your life."

You might think my experience was rare. It was not. A mentor of young ministers tells a story about a woman named Susan who had friends who were

pre-med, pre-law, or something similar (*Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 3, pp. 146-148). They got along well until she felt a call to ministry at which point these friends assumed she would eventually come to her senses. When she started seminary, they realized she would not, and the nature of many of these friendships changed.

But the most painful response came from Susan's family. When she finished college, her parents asked her what she wanted to do next. They noted things her friends were doing, but when she said she planned to go to seminary, there was silence... Finally, her father said, "Young lady, we have invested over \$100,000 in one of the finest private colleges in the country (This was a number of years ago!). You are not going to waste it by going into the ministry." She became a minister anyway, but doing so set her against her own parents.

To this day, loyalty to Christ can create conflict because Jesus demands so much. Our reading ends with him saying, "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." That's why there aren't many family friendly teachings of Jesus. It's not that he devalues the family. It's that his focus is on the realm of God he brings near, and it is more important than anything else.

That is still not an easy message to hear, but it does shed light on Jesus' startling words in Matthew 10. On the surface, they seem out of character for him. With a little understanding, they have a logic that fits his entire life and ministry. But interpretation is required to get this.

What I would add is that since we all interpret, we need to allow for the differences that come with interpretation and try to resist demonizing all other views. Yet at the very same time, we still have to act upon what we believe God is calling us to do.

In regard to the first reality, I would hold up as a negative example something a high-standing public official in Texas said to his state convention recently about a candidate of the other party. He said the man talked about biblical teaching in ways that were blasphemous, and thus, he was going to hell, for sure.

Sometimes demonization is quite literal. In this case, the would-be blasphemer has an MDiv from a very fine seminary, and I do have to wonder if the public official has notified God that the Divine no longer has to shoulder the responsibility of judgment. He's got that now. One observer noted that somewhere in the distance, the ghosts of the Spanish Inquisition are nodding approvingly and saying, "Now that's the spirit!"

But that's not the spirit in a serious sense. We can disagree without demonizing all who have a different view, especially when it comes to biblical interpretation. The leader condemning another man to hell surely thinks there can be no proper view but his own. In fact, he may think he just takes the Bible literally and believes what it says, but no one does that with the whole Bible.

Sell all that we have and give to the poor — has anyone done that? Or handle snakes, as suggested in Mark 16? Bill Leonard once told a Pentecostal snake-handling preacher that he was the only true inerrantist he ever met because he takes Mark 16:18 literally when it says that if we have faith, we can handle snakes and not get hurt. Any true believers? We all interpret. So, we need to leave room for different views.

But this does not mean that we do not speak up for what we believe. In the reading from Jeremiah, the prophet laments the difficult message God has given him to proclaim. He must shout, "Violence and destruction!" and everyone hates him for it. Genuine prophets are never popular because their message is never easy. Jeremiah doesn't want to proclaim his message, but he says that when he refuses to deliver it or even mention the God who gave it, there is something like a burning fire shut up in his bones. He cannot hold back what God calls him to deliver.

Nor can we, now should we, we just need to extend a little grace to those who disagree with us. None of us is always right. We're going to need a little grace sometime. The least we can do is return the favor.

In the end, the complexity of scripture is a wonderful gift, and our willingness to struggle with it is a sacred privilege and responsibility. It's often in the tension that we see light and hope. May God grant us the courage to embrace the challenge of interpretation and the wisdom to allow others room to do the same.