

Combating the Relativization of Scripture

Lesson Eight Experience, Once-Removed

Texts: Matthew 16:13-20, John 20:19-31, 1 John 1:1-4

BASIC CONTEXT:

1. In the Matthew passage, Jesus addressed the fact that there was a considerable amount of confusion about His identity. Everyone knew He was someone truly unique and special. The Sadducees and Pharisees had put their assessment of Him on a physical basis. They demanded a sign, something they could directly experience, to provide a kind of proof. But Jesus showed the disciples that His ministry wasn't about what miracles He could perform. That kind of thinking would take over their lives, He warned them, like yeast left unbaked in dough, leading to a state of rotteness, not sustenance. Later, Jesus allowed Peter to voice not only the confusion of others, but also to state his own beliefs.
2. In the passage from John's Gospel, the disciples were confused. Mary of Magdala was given a message from the risen Lord, who wanted the disciples to know that He wouldn't be on earth long, because He would soon return, in His new body, to the Father. They gathered to wait, and sure enough He appeared to them too. However, Thomas was absent and refused to believe that Jesus was alive again, unless he could see and touch.
3. By the time that the apostle John, as an old man, writes 1 John, many new people have come to believe in Jesus who had returned to heaven. Quite surprisingly, John begins 1 John with an assertion that people should put their faith in his –John's-- own experience and witness of the reality of Jesus whom he and others had touched and seen.
4. So – given the warnings Jesus gave to people who would base faith on what they could see and touch – why would John urge people to put faith in what he himself saw and touched?

RELATIVIZATION INDEX:

The design of the lesson is now to link or index the nine or more suggested categories of relativization to the personalities in the passages, and note the results. By way of review the categories of relativization are: EXPERIENCE, HUMAN INTELLIGENCE,

TEMPORAL VARIABLES, COMMUNITY, HISTORY, CULTURE, RACE, TIME, DESIRE/AMBITION.

The application of Matthew 16:13-20, John 20:19-31, 1 John 1:1-4

1. REVEALED REPRESENTATIONS: Matthew 16:13-20

- (a) People make much of the importance of first-hand experience. All do-it-yourself books, all testimonials in advertising, and all of what we call “hands-on” situations fill for people what they consider to be a need. However, every single situation or experience that a person witnesses passes from the status of an event, to the status of a memory. One way that representational thinkers express this is that all facts pass from the present into the past and are stored there as representations. Of course, memories can be bolstered and reinforced by photographs, written accounts, or recordings. But all of these are representations of events or people or states of being – they are not the events, people, or states of being themselves.
- (b) Unfortunately, there’s a large amount of arrogance attached to representations. People believe fervently that their own personal representations are more valid than even those of people they love and trust. “I was there,” is the way this is usually expressed. The Pharisees and Sadducees would have discounted or explained away all the stories of the miracles Jesus did for others, if He did not produce a miracle for them on demand. They believed they could prove Jesus to be a fraud if He was unable to provide a miracle for their own partaking.
- (c) In the Matthew passage, we see the way that the disciples tried to process all the experiences they’d had with Jesus. Some people weren’t able to take at face value what Jesus said about Himself: that He only did what His Father told Him to do. They explained away the story of His miraculous birth. They wrestled with an incredible notion: that He must be a resurrected being, perhaps the recently-departed John the Baptist, or maybe Elijah, who had been dead for centuries. All this to avoid the simple truth, that Jesus was who He said He was, the Son of God.
- (d) Jesus told Peter that his conclusion that Jesus was the promised Anointed One--the Christ—and the Son of God wasn’t a conclusion from either Peter’s own experience, nor from the collective experience of other people. This conclusion, Jesus stated, was a revealed truth. As a revealed truth, it was superior to what any person – or persons – observed, deduced, or imagined.
- (e) Furthermore, Jesus said that this understanding was a bedrock.
Knowledge of the identity and purpose of Jesus is a gift from God,

something the Father both purposed and propelled into the minds of all believers, starting with His own disciples.

2. SECOND-HAND REPRESENTATIONS: *John 20:19-31*

- a) After the Resurrection of Jesus from the dead, people were confused. Even people like Peter were confused, he who had been given by revelation the knowledge that Jesus was the Son of God. In Luke 24 we read of how people responded to stories about the Resurrection. Jesus called people who didn't believe He had fulfilled Old Testament Scripture "foolish and slow of heart" (Luke 24:25) and even chided His closest friends for being troubled and letting doubts rise in their minds (verse 39.) Luke's account of the disciples first sight of the risen Lord goes a bit further, saying that their joy contributed to their unbelief.
- b) John chapter 20 shows us something extraordinary. For people who wanted to believe, were prone to believe, Jesus gave an enormous concession. He revealed Himself to them, and actually invited them to touch Him. It was His idea – like all revelation, it originates in the mind of God, not in the will or desire of man. (See also John 1:10-13 for another glimpse into this proactive nature of God.)
- c) It is remarkable and notable, however, that Jesus showed them the results of His Resurrection, and did not make them witnesses of the event itself. The most important, miraculous, and unique event of all of human history was not seen with any human eyes. People witnessed the result of the resurrection, not the event. No human had any representation of what happened except through what Jesus showed and told them – in other words, except through revelation.
- d) Quite notably, Jesus did not respond enthusiastically to what amounted to a demand for a sign from Thomas. Though He did offer a tactile experience, He also rebuked Thomas for his attitude of tentative belief – which is just another way of describing doubt (as opposed to downright disbelief.) Jesus acknowledged that belief is easy when you have first-hand experience. He didn't commend Thomas for acknowledging the obvious and inescapable proof before him. On the other hand, Jesus said that people who would believe without first-hand experience are actually blessed. That includes every believer who came to Christ without seeing or touching Him, for over two thousand years.

3. REVELATION AS AUTHORIZED EXPERIENCE: *1 John 1:1-4*

- a) The words of the aged apostle John to a new generation of believers had a purpose: to bring the state of satisfaction that Jesus described as "blessed" to Thomas. With those words, John wanted to create faith by encouraging his readers to put faith in his (John's) own personal experience.

- b) John is very specific about this being a kind of tactile, ocular experience – he calls to mind what he had seen, beheld (not just with a glimpse but with sustained attention) and had actually handled.
- c) He identifies the Subject of what he'd seen and handled – a Being who had His origin outside of space and time. Completely gone is any discussion or question about whether or not He was the Son of God. The issue of His resurrection from the dead is established as historical fact, beyond contention.
- d) John asserts, without apology nor qualifying nor amending, the facts of the physical reality of Jesus in his own experience. On the basis of this, he further asserts a kind of authorized experience that he, as an apostle can claim. Also without any apology he asserts that his own experience is valid as the basis of what he describes as an announcement. Without acceptance of this announcement, there is no possibility of fellowship with a Being who is no longer accessible for seeing or touching: the risen Jesus who is now in heaven.
- e) Therefore the tactile and ocular experiences of John, a kind of second-hand representation, are authorized as the basis for the faith of others – to be accessed by all believers of all time -- as if they themselves had actually had the experiences that John had so many years previously.
- f) By extension, we can accurately state that all of the testimonies of those who were eyewitnesses to the results of the resurrection of Jesus had special representational force. (In fact, Acts 1:21-22 shows that eyewitness status was essential to the office of an apostle.) Those experiences which we now access as the New Testament records are to be regarded by us as being as valid and pertinent to our lives as our own personal experiences. In fact, they are to be given precedence as being more accurate and authoritative than our own personal experiences.
- g) By further extension, we can see that the idea of appropriating someone else's authorized experience is actually ancient. See Deuteronomy 6:21-25, for instance, for the establishment of a practice of appropriating authorized experience that is thousands of years old and practiced each Passover even today in the 21st century by Jewish heads of families.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF DISCOURSE:

A DISCOURSE THAT TRIES TO RELATIVIZE SCRIPTURE:

The demand of Thomas that stated that he would withhold belief from anything that was not in his own personal experience was a demand that Jesus fulfilled – but with no congratulations. On the other hand, He identified as “blessed” all subsequent believers who would appropriate the apostolic experiences as if they were their very own.

When someone claims to be a believer, yet stubbornly insists like Thomas that all his words and decisions must come out of the font of his or her own experience, his discourse cannot be pleasing to the Lord. Whenever we find ourselves thinking or saying, “Well, the Bible may say that, but I’ve never seen it,” or saying or thinking, “Things haven’t worked that way in my life,” or “That was way back in Bible times and it doesn’t apply today,” then watch out!

A DISCOURSE SHAPED BY THE REVELATION OF THE LORD:

Such an appropriation of the witness of Scripture, giving it credence and authority even beyond our own experiences and memories, is a skill that becomes easier with the doing. The more we make a deliberate decision to depend upon what God says – about Himself, about our lives, about what He desires for us—and create discourse that matches that decision, the more pleasing to the Lord we are.

Often such a discourse requires that we closely analyze what underlies our discourse, especially in decision making and assessing personal situations. If we give Scripture foundational status, and our own experiences only provisional authority, our language will reflect a dependence upon the Lord and not upon our own life experiences. Such language will edify and turn others to the Lord, and in fact provide a more accurate view of our circumstances than we could ever do alone.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1) Look at Matthew 16:1-12. How does yeast change the character of the substance of the substance where it resides? How do you think that Jesus’ warnings against the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees relates to the demands of those two groups for a sign?
- 2) Look at Deuteronomy 1:19-40. Joshua and Caleb made the decision to represent the Promised Land according to the words of God through Moses, instead of coming to the same conclusions as the other ten spies. What was the basis of the discourse of Joshua and Caleb? What was the basis of the discourse of the other ten spies?
- 3) Explain the following: “Knowledge of the identity and purpose of Jesus is a gift from God, something the Father both purposed and propelled into the minds of all believers, starting with His own disciples.” In what way has this lesson helped you understand that you must operate on revelation?
- 4) During the last week, as you discussed problems or difficulties in your life, have you used discourse that is “blessed,” according to the way that Jesus used that word in speaking to Thomas?

- 5) When a Jewish father tells his son at Passover time this year, “I was a slave in Egypt,” how is he demonstrating a revealed representation? A second-hand representation?
- 6) How would it be accurate to say, “The Bible is authorized experience”?
- 7) In what way would a non-believer see in a believer the results of the Resurrection of Jesus?
- 8) What can you do this week to cause your daily discourse to demonstrate the results, in your life, of the Resurrection of Jesus?