

An Exercise in Learning to Read the Bible as a Seeker

Have you ever been reading along in Scripture and wondered, "Why did I never see that before?" or "I wonder why I never heard a sermon on this?" or "I wonder why we don't practice this?"

I have. Sometimes I notice something on my own. On other occasions, it is someone else in the body of Christ who draws my attention to a particular verse or passage of scripture. Sometimes these discoveries have little practical implication. But other times these discoveries carry HUGE implications.

For those of us who have heard and read the Bible ever since we can remember, it can be hard to identify with people who have not grown up with such an experience. This article is an exercise and a challenge for anyone who wishes to experience a bit of what it is like to read the Bible as a seeker for the first time or to read a familiar passage with new eyes.

Be Baptized or be Condemned? Really?

Our family has had the privilege of studying the Bible with scores of seekers the last ten years. Many have little or no familiarity with the Scriptures. We often read verses like this one: *"Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned."* (Mark 16:16)

Can you imagine growing up in a non-Christian home and reading this verse? Can you imagine living in a country where being baptized will mean persecution for the rest of your life?

We often study the Bible with people like this who come to State College, PA to study or work. When one lady who studied the Bible with us read this verse, she buried her head in her hands and began weeping and sobbing as she thought about her grandparents who had died, never hearing the Gospel nor being baptized. It was not long until she was ready to be baptized.

For many people we interact with, being baptized will cost them their job when they return to their home country. Following Jesus will completely turn their social world upside down. Some will not be able to return to their home country or they may be murdered. Some may return to their countries but never be permitted to leave their country again the rest of their life. In some countries, the government will put pressure on those

who interact with the Christian. They may pressure the relatives to urge the Christian to give up their beliefs. They may pressure the employer to fire the Christian employee if they do not give up their faith. They may pressure the landlord to evict the Christian tenant if the tenant does not recant. In many countries, a follower of Jesus will always need to be glancing around when they leave home to see if anyone is following them. They will need to avoid areas of their town or country where someone might try to harass or arrest them. Our family visited an Asian country a number of years ago and stayed with some Christian workers for a few days. We got to experience the suspense our friends lived with as they looked for any watching them. Imagine living with suspense like this for the rest of your life!

For those of us who grew up in Christian homes in countries with religious freedom, it is typically easier to get baptized than to not get baptized (at least beyond a certain age). If a young person does not get baptized by a certain age, they may face considerable social pressure from relatives, friends, and others in the church to do so.

But for many people in Asia or the Middle East, or even here in North America, choosing to follow Jesus and be being baptized will result in rejection and even severe persecution.

Do not Divorce and Remarry? Really?

A few years ago, we were reading through the book of Matthew with a man who had very little Scriptural understanding and we got to this verse:

"Furthermore, it has been said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except for the cause of fornication, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery". (Matthew 5:31-32)

The man who was reading finished the paragraph and said, "I don't think I agree with this. This was for people two thousand years ago, correct?" I assured him that, no, we believe the New Testament is applicable in all eras and in all parts of the world. In the course of conversation, he told me about his unscriptural marriage situation. If he took these words of Jesus seriously, it would turn his social world upside down.

Love Your Enemies? Really?

Sometimes people who have been devout believers all their life and read the Bible every day, will read a verse for the twentieth or the fiftieth time and can't believe they've read this verse so many times without ever thinking about its fuller implications.

Consider this verse... *"But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you."* (Matthew 5:44)

This verse can be mind-blowing to a person who did not grow up in a non-resistant home. *"What sort of philosophy is this?!"*

Interestingly, I find that when I explain to unbelievers, Jesus's philosophy about returning good for evil, and picture what this actually looks like in real life, they find the concept quite attractive. But still, the idea of not resorting to self-defense on a personal or national level is almost unfathomable to them.

Many Christians have read this verse from Matthew 5 quite often, but never thought about it applying to war or self-defense until suddenly one day the truth of these verses really jumps out at them. They can't believe that they never saw it before.

For some, such teaching has far-reaching consequences. Those with "God and Country" beliefs or nationalistic fervor need to completely tear down their old belief system and rebuild on the teachings and example of Christ. Some need to find new jobs. Family members who are patriotic may disown or shun them. For those who are required to perform military duties, the consequence may be time in prison or even death.

For those of us who grew up being taught the truths of these verses, the social pressure on us is to obey and follow Jesus. This can make it hard for us to identify with someone who is really struggling to embrace the truth of a verse like this one in Matthew.

Cover My Head? Really?

For several years we studied the Bible regularly with a young American lady who grew up in a nominal Christian home. She soaked up everything she read and was aligning her thinking and actions with the truth of God's Word. She was looking forward to being baptized. But then one evening we read the verses about women keeping silent in the churches, and we also read from the following passage:

"But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of the woman is the man, and the head

of Christ is God. Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head, but every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, since it is the same as if her head were shaved. If a woman will not cover her head, then she should cut her hair short. But since it is disgraceful for a woman to cut off her hair or shave her head, let her cover her head. For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man." (I Corinthians 11:3-7)

We did not comment on the scriptures, but it wasn't long until she was in tears. These scriptures triggered something within her. This young lady had been the recipient of racism at school and male chauvinism in the work place, and to her, this teaching felt WRONG! She believed strongly in "equality" and these verses seemed to be saying the opposite. Can you picture how big the changes in thought and practice are required in order for someone like this to embrace these teachings?

Up until the last couple centuries, most Christians who read this scriptural passage would have understood immediately what was being taught, since most Christian women practiced head-covering. As recently as 150 years ago, the majority of Christian women covered their heads in deference to this scriptural teaching. But then theologians and pastors began teaching that this practice is no longer necessary today, and now those who practice head-covering are in the minority. Now many churches are even fine with men leading public prayer with their heads covered. So, imagine you are a woman who is seeking the will of God for your life, and you attend one of those churches and one day you read I Corinthians 11, and you think, *Wait a minute. How come I never saw this before? I've read this many times but this is the first time it jumped out at me. Why aren't the women in our church covering their heads? I always knew there was a principle involved, but what if God wants me to take this very literally? I could never do this. Everybody would laugh at me. I would look silly. People would tell me that I am being legalistic. There is no way I could do this!*

Recently I was at a seekers' gathering, and I asked for a raise of hands to see how many of them had an experience similar to what I just described. Many raised their hands. And there are many more thousands of Christians across the globe who have had a very similar experience when they read this passage in the Bible. For many years, my wife and I have benefitted from and participated in a support group for thousands of such ladies who are often the only one in their church practicing head-covering.

For you ladies who grew up in churches that have continued this ancient scriptural practice, starting to cover your head as a young girl or lady might have been a bit strange or unusual, but in many ways, it was the easy thing to do. Everyone expected you to follow God in this way once you reached a certain age.

But for most seekers and unchurched women, this is a big deal. It has enormous social implications. All their friends and relatives will look at them strangely. Some will try to talk them out of it or ask them not to bring disgrace on the family. Some will be mocked and scorned for it. Often times, the worst rejection and persecution from this issue does not come from non-believers but from professing Christian relatives and friends. Following Jesus in this way is a HUGE step for such seekers and it drastically changes their social world.

Do not invite Relatives and Rich Neighbors? Really?

“Jesus said also to the man who had invited him, ‘When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.’” (Luke 14:12-14)

Really? Did Jesus actually expect this man never to invite his family, his relatives, and his rich neighbors to his house for a meal again? Maybe this is a poor translation. Let’s read a different one...

“Jesus also went on to say to the one who had invited Him, ‘When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or wealthy neighbors, otherwise they may also invite you in return and that will be your repayment. But when you give a banquet or a reception, invite the poor, the disabled, the lame, and the blind, and you will be blessed because they cannot repay you; for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.’” (Luke 14:12-14, AMP)

That didn’t help much to use a different translation. This translation even includes luncheons and receptions. This is a really hard saying!

Chances are that many of you have read across these verses and assumed that Jesus certainly didn’t mean that we shouldn’t invite relatives and friends to our house for a meal, did He? Or that we should be inviting those who can’t repay us instead? That was me also for many years... Perhaps you have read these verses and subconsciously

thought, *Well, that certainly doesn’t apply to me. Jesus was talking to a certain Pharisee.*

Or maybe you thought that Jesus is just teaching a principle. Well, yes, there is definitely a principle to follow. But is there more than a principle included here? Is there a direct application that Jesus wants us to follow? I have concluded that there is more than a principle. It is easy for us to “principle away a teaching” if we don’t like the direct application; whether that be baptism, loving one’s enemies, covering one’s head, or changing who we invite to meals.

The Hard Sayings of Jesus...

Did you know that it is hard to be a serious Christian in the twenty-first century? Did you know that it is hard for all Christians, including Anabaptists, to practice “the all things of the Bible”?

Some of us like to think of ourselves as teaching “the all things of the Bible” but did you ever hear a sermon on Luke 14:12-14? I did, when I was about thirty years old. If it was not for that sermon, I maybe wouldn’t even care about this topic.

Did you ever see a motto in an Anabaptist home based on these verses? If not, why not? What makes us choose the mottoes that we select?

What thoughts or reasonings might be coming to your mind right now?

Have you been having any thoughts like this?

- *Certainly Jesus doesn’t mind if we invite relatives, well-to-do people, and people who can invite us to their house for dinner.*
- *Jesus certainly doesn’t expect us to take these verses at face value.*
- *Maybe this was just for that time period or for that Pharisee.*
- *Maybe this applies to feasts and not ordinary meals.*
- *There is no way this is to be taken literally.*
- *If I took this literally, we couldn’t have our normal Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners.*
- *Didn’t Jesus eat with his friends?*
- *I don’t enjoy cooking for strangers.*
- *I actually don’t enjoy cooking, period.*
- *My house isn’t big enough to host dinners or feasts so this probably doesn’t apply to me.*
- *I’m a man and I don’t cook.*

If you had any thoughts similar to this, welcome to the crowd.

And... you've just experienced what "seekers" experience when they study the New Testament and seek to obey its teachings. These are the kinds of thoughts that go through their mind when they read a "hard saying" of Jesus.

When an unchurched person or a nominal Christian reads something about forsaking the world and getting baptized it has HUGE implications for their life.

When a "God and Country" Christian realizes that Jesus is calling His followers to put away their swords and refrain from self-defense, and return good for evil to all people, they are faced with a complete reorientation of their life and values.

There are HUGE social changes for those Christians who, after being told that literal obedience to the teaching in I Corinthians 11:2-16 was only for the first century, begin questioning whether there is more than a principle behind this and conclude that there is a literal application for Christians today.

There are men who would have liked to join a more scriptural church, but their wives declared they would not be caught dead covering their heads. The social implications are just too great. And they are probably correct... It is likely that their "Christian" friends and relatives will make snide or disparaging comments if they ever take up this practice.

And when Anabaptists or other Christians decide to begin inviting people outside of their close-knit social circle to their homes for meals, there will be HUGE social implications.

I shared this exercise as part of a message at a large Mennonite church several years ago. After church one brother greeted another brother and asked him what his plans were for the afternoon. The second brother replied, "Well... we were invited away for lunch at a church family's home, but after that message, I'm not sure whether we are still invited there or not."

Now... in this passage in Luke, it is possible that Jesus was only addressing these instructions to the Pharisee and that he wanted this particular Pharisee to stop inviting his relatives and friends and start inviting poor people instead.

And it is possible that this command for us not to invite relatives and friends but instead to invite the poor could be read in the original Greek as "invite not only your relatives and friends, but also the poor."

Whew... thanks for saying that and coming to my rescue. I was almost afraid that I was going to be faced with some big social changes in the days and weeks ahead...

If you thought anything similar to this last response, then you now know what it feels like for a "seeker" to get a "breath of fresh air" from a pastor or "Bible scholar" or friend who helps them "understand" what a passage isn't saying and what it supposedly really means. Some folks after getting what feels like a "breath of fresh air", push the thoughts and questions aside, and the questions never surface again, or at least not for a long time.

But for other folks, the thoughts don't go away, and the questions linger...

- *What if Jesus really wants me to get baptized?*
- *What if I am living in adultery?*
- *What if Jesus really wants me to cover my head?*
- *What if Jesus really wants me to take up the life of a "defenseless Christian"?*
- *What if Jesus wants me to start inviting the poor and the foreigner and the disadvantaged to my home instead of so many relatives and rich neighbors?*

What percentage of guests to your home are strangers, people of a different social circle, or folks who can't return the favor?

Believe it or not, there are many Christians around the world who take this instruction from Luke 14 just as seriously as what Plain Anabaptists take the other scripture passages mentioned earlier. Children in these homes grow up assuming that inviting people who cannot return the favor is how all Christians should live.

Can you imagine with me how many people might now be in the Kingdom of God if every Mennonite, Amish, Hutterite, and Brethren family who emigrated to North America the last few centuries – and every one of their descendants – had made a direct application to this teaching of Jesus?

Can you imagine with me how many people might join the Kingdom of God in the next ten years if every Christian who makes luncheons, dinners, feasts, and receptions would invite more of the folks Jesus said to invite, and less of the folks Jesus said not to invite?

I am convinced that Plain Anabaptists have hosting skills that when coupled with strong community dynamics make a compelling outreach tool. Yet this powerful tool lies dormant in many communities. What if we leveraged our cooking talents and our hospitality in the direction that Jesus instructed? What if the guests around our

tables included mostly handicapped, disadvantaged, lonely and poor people; strangers and others who cannot return the favor?

The Cost of Discipleship...

Once the truth of scripture becomes clear to us, and we are ready to act on it, we will find some way to start applying it!

A person who decides to follow Jesus and obey Him starts taking steps toward getting baptized.

A person who decides to love his enemies may start looking for ways to bless his lifelong enemy.

A woman who decides to cover her head, may start putting something—a kerchief or scarf— on her head whenever she spends her daily time with God.

A person who can't cook or doesn't have a very big house finds some way to provide food for people and eat with them. Maybe they take dinner to the park and invite people to eat with them there. Maybe they buy bread and lunch meat and lettuce and chips and eat it with some mentally challenged folks. Maybe they take a homeless person to a restaurant and eat a bowl of soup together. Maybe they get take-out food to eat with elderly folks. (And don't feel bad if you can't put on a feast. Jesus's instruction was addressed to someone who had the capability to put on feasts and dinners.)

Even if we don't literally invite the poor, the blind and the maimed, but instead invite strangers, foreigners, the lonely, the disadvantaged (other groups of people who aren't as likely to return the favor), our application of these verses is still going to have big changes for our social life going forward.

And before I go further, I need to insert here that this article is not about weary and worn women and girls being asked to do more cooking and hosting. Notice that Jesus did not address how much to host but who to host. However, if we do more hosting, we as men need to quit our projects earlier, roll up our sleeves and ask our wives what we can do to help that will assist them the most.

Soon after moving to State College ten years ago, about fifty percent of our church at that time was raised Anabaptist and the other half was not. Most of the latter had no Christian relatives or friends outside of the church who appreciated their beliefs and with whom they could enjoy social times together.

When our first Thanksgiving and Christmas came around, those of us with Christian relatives all headed off to our home towns for holiday gatherings with Christian family

and friends. Some months later we learned that those in our church without Christian family and friends felt rather deserted. Who were they supposed to spend Thanksgiving and Christmas with? As we listened to their hearts, it made a big impression on my wife and I, and we have treated most holidays differently in the years since then. After all, we had lived in a community away from our relatives for a number of years and we knew what it was like to not attend family gatherings over some holidays. If you've never had such an experience, the feeling is hard to imagine. You could try skipping a family gathering some time over a holiday to see what it feels like, but you will hardly feel what they feel. After all, you already had an invitation and you can always go to relatives' houses another time.

So, if you decide to take up this calling of Jesus, I can almost guarantee that you will have relatives and friends and maybe even fellow brothers and sisters in the church who will not understand or appreciate your new choices and new values. You may even feel some rejection from them. (Jesus also faced rejection for doing what God wanted Him to do.) And... when you feel this rejection, you will be able to feel a bit of what new believers and seekers feel when they experience rejection from their relatives and friends. And remember... the rejection they feel is likely many times greater than the rejection or disapproval you face.

There are many more teachings commanded in the New Testament. If you are already practicing this teaching of Jesus from Luke 14, look for another instruction that you might have just been skimming over, and begin making direct application to it!

Some years ago, I attended a church in another state. And even though I don't remember the name of the preacher that morning, he said something that has stuck with me ever since. His words have been a motto for me and helped shape my life focus.

His statement was something like this, "There is much in the Bible that can be hard to understand. But I find that there is much in the Bible that is painfully easy to understand."

What if each of us would focus our thoughts, our energies, our actions, and all of our life around the much in the Bible that is painfully easy to understand?

Is Luke 14:12-14 easy to understand? Are we willing to be a true seeker – and pay the cost?

~Ernest Eby, December 2024

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