

# TAKING IT LITERALLY

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I find some hard sayings in the Bible. Hard to understand and hard to follow. Like, “*If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple.*” (Luke 14:26) Especially since elsewhere, I’m clearly told to honor my parents (Matthew 15:4), to love my wife and never treat her harshly (Colossians 3:19), not to be hard on my children (Colossians 3:21), and to love my brothers and sisters with a pure heart fervently (1 Peter 1:22). They can become sticking points in my obedience.

In all honesty, do you find some of the Bible’s commands difficult to implement? What do you do with those—just pick and choose? If so, doesn’t that bother your conscience sometimes? Or do you spiritualize them into impotent greeting card phrases?

The Old Testament presents a lot of commands that appear bizarre by contemporary standards. Like, if your child talks back to you, take her out of the house and stone her to death. How is *that* not treating her harshly?!?

Well, other people have struggled with such issues, too! In May, 2000, just after the State of Vermont passed legislation that permitted homosexual couples to contract “civil unions,” a radio show host, who was an Orthodox Jew, offered some commentary on the issue loosely based in the Bible. Soon, a letter from a listener began to circulate the online community. In part, it read like this:

*Dear Dr. Laura,*

*Thank you for doing so much to educate people regarding God’s Law. I have learned a great deal from your show, and I try to share that knowledge with as many people as I can. I do need some advice from you, however, regarding some of the specific laws and how best to follow them.*

- a) When I burn a bull on the altar as a sacrifice, I know it creates a pleasing odor for the Lord (Leviticus 1:9). The problem is my neighbors. They claim the odor is not pleasing to them. Should I smite them?*
- b) I would like to sell my daughter into slavery, as sanctioned in Exodus 21.7. In this day and age, what do you think would be a fair price for her?*
- c) Leviticus 25:44 states that I may indeed possess slaves, both male and female, provided they are purchased from neighboring nations. A friend of mine claims that this applies to Mexicans, but not Canadians. Can you clarify? Why can’t I own Canadians?*

- d) *I have a neighbor who insists on working on the Sabbath. Exodus 35:2 clearly states he should be put to death. Am I morally obligated to kill him myself?*
- e) *Leviticus 21:20 states that I may not approach the altar of God if I have a defect in my eyesight. I have to admit that I wear reading glasses. Does my vision have to be 20/20, or is there some wiggle room here?*
- f) *I know from Leviticus 11:6-8 that touching the skin of a dead pig makes me unclean, but may I still play football if I wear gloves?*

*I know you have studied these things extensively, so I am confident you can help. Thank you again for reminding us that God's word is eternal and unchanging.*

*Your devoted disciple and adoring fan.*

A.J. Jacobs, a New York journalist, had grown up in a secular Jewish home and decided to take another look at the religion of his forefathers and wrote a book about it. He said...

*The Year of Living Biblically is about my quest to live the ultimate biblical life. To follow every single rule in the Bible – as literally as possible. I obey the famous ones:*

- *The Ten Commandments*
- *Love thy neighbor*
- *Be fruitful and multiply*

*But also, the hundreds of oft-ignored ones.*

- *Do not wear clothes of mixed fibers.*
- *Do not shave your beard*
- *Stone adulterers*

*Why? Well, I grew up in a very secular home (I'm officially Jewish but I'm Jewish in the same way the Olive Garden is an Italian restaurant). I'd always assumed religion would just wither away and we'd live in a neo-Enlightenment world. I was, of course, spectacularly wrong. So was I missing something essential to being a human? Or was half the world deluded?*

*I decided to dive in headfirst. To try to experience the Bible myself and find out what's good in it, and what's maybe not so relevant to the 21st century.*

*The resulting year was fascinating, entertaining and informative. It was equal parts irreverent and reverent. It was filled with surprising insights almost every day. (I know it's not biblical to boast, so apologies for that).*

*The book that came out of the year has several layers:*

- *An exploration of some of the Bible's startlingly relevant rules. I tried not to covet, gossip, or lie for a year. I'm a journalist in New York. This was not easy.*
- *An investigation of the rules that baffle the 21st century brain. How to justify the laws about stoning homosexuals? Or smashing idols? Or sacrificing oxen? And how do you follow those in modern-day Manhattan?*
- *A look at various fascinating religious groups. I embedded myself among several groups that take the Bible literally in their own way, from creationists to snake handlers, Hasidim to the Amish.*
- *A critique of fundamentalism. I became the ultra-fundamentalist. I found that fundamentalists may claim to take the Bible literally, but they actually just pick and choose certain rules to follow. By taking fundamentalism extreme, I found that literalism is not the best way to interpret the Bible.*
- *A spiritual journey. As an agnostic, I'd never seriously explored such things as sacredness and revelation.*

Have you ever wondered if there are two Gods in the Bible—a harsh One in the Old Testament, and a loving One in the New Testament? Or, if God was bipolar? Or, if having a Son of His own finally helped Him to mature?

To read such things as a camel passing through the eye of a needle, or the command to turn the other cheek, or to love even your enemy, will make even the most faithful wince and wonder.

And what about this gruesome instruction from Jesus...? *“So if your eye—even your good eye—causes (leads) you to lust, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your hand—even your stronger hand—causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.”* (Matthew 5:29-30) This teaching was so important that it was repeated again in Matthew 18:8-9!

How could your eye lead you to sin? By resting too long on an object of temptation. Since this immediately follows Jesus' words about committing adultery in the heart by entertaining lustful thoughts, the context clarifies the saying. And that's just why we need more than the red letter words!

The most notable case of this kind of sin in the Bible is King David, who saw Bathsheba bathing on her roof one afternoon and lingered too long admiring her. Abusing his power he took her, slept with her, then had her husband killed so he might marry her.

Such issues have long been a source of controversy in the Church.

Shortly after the publication of William Tyndale's English New Testament, the attempt to restrict its circulation was defended on the ground that the simple reader might mistakenly take such language literally and "pluck out his eyes, and so the whole realm will be full of blind men, to the great decay of the nation and the manifest loss of the King's grace; and thus by reading of the Holy Scriptures will the whole realm come into confusion." So a preaching monk is said to have declared in a Cambridge sermon.

But he met his match in Hugh Latimer, who, in a sermon preached the following Sunday, said that simple people were well able to distinguish between literal and figurative terms. "For example," Latimer said, "if we describe a fox preaching in a monk's hooded robe, nobody imagines that a fox is actually meant, but that craft and hypocrisy are described," and he added, "which so often are found disguised in that garb."

In fact, it is not recorded that anyone ever mutilated himself because of these words in the Gospels.

And then Jesus said this: *"If you want to be my disciple, you must hate everyone else by comparison—your father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even your own life. Otherwise, you cannot be my disciple."* (Luke 14:26)

This is hard to accept and hard to reconcile with Jesus' other teachings. A proper care for one's family is generally one of those nobler and more humane issues. Nevertheless, a man or woman might be so bound up by family ties as to have no time or interest for matters of even greater importance, and there could be no matter of greater importance than the Kingdom of God.

We know that in biblical idiom *to hate* can mean to love less. That "hating" in this saying of Jesus means loving less is shown by the parallel saying in Matthew 10:37: *"Anyone who loves his father or mother **more than me** is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter **more than me** is not worthy of me."*

In Matthew's Gospel these words are followed by the saying about taking up the cross and following Jesus; the implication of this sequence is that giving one's family second place to the kingdom of God is one way of taking up the cross.

## **Making Sense of It**

Some researchers have found that there are a lot of people in America today who love Jesus, but hate the church. They've been burned by the church or by people in churches. They've been bored to death by irrelevant sermonizing. They've been disappointed by the hypocrisy of sinning preachers and corporate Christianity.

In fact, a movement, known as Red Letter Christians, under the leadership of men like Tony Campolo and Jim Wallis, attributes superior value to the red letter quotes of the

words of Jesus in your Bible. Some suggest that we need only follow His words and may dismiss the words of others, even His apostles. While that would underscore character and justice, it would minimize history and the church going forward from the time of Jesus, and it would offer few examples of applying His words in everyday life.

We believe that the whole Bible is the Word of God—inspired by the Holy Spirit, without essential error in its original form, and as Paul taught, *“Every scripture is inspired by God and useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the person dedicated to God may be capable and equipped for every good work.”* (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

However, *“rightly dividing the Word of truth”* (2 Timothy 2:15)—properly parsing it according to its historical, cultural, and theological context—requires some effort to learn more than just the “red letters.” It does *not* require severe scholarship, however, so much as prayerful, thoughtful, careful reading, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

I have said that the key to understanding how to apply the Bible is Jesus—who He is, why He came, and what He did for us all.

“Who a person is” takes into account more than what he thinks of himself, or what he says of himself (since we all say far less than we think about ourselves). Jesus taught us to *“know a tree by its fruit”* (Matthew 7:16-20), which requires an external observer (the apostles) in the context of various conditions and events of everyday life.

By those who knew Him firsthand and stood to lose the most if they judged Him incorrectly, Jesus was deemed to be the Son of the Living God—the Messiah, the Savior of the world, God in human form!

He came to fulfill the Law that Moses gave, not to abolish it. He said, *“I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not even the smallest detail of God’s law will disappear until its purpose is achieved.”* (Matthew 5:18)

*“UNTIL ITS PURPOSE IS ACHIEVED.”* There is an “expiration date” on the package, but it is not tied to the calendar; it is tied to God’s purpose. His purpose for the Law given through Moses was fulfilled by Jesus, who was *“born under the Law”* (Galatians 4:4). What Jesus thereby achieved was *“to redeem those who were (also) under the Law, so that [they and] we might receive the adoption of sons”* (Galatians 4:5).

While Jesus did not come to destroy the Law, He was heard to say repeatedly, *“You have heard it said by your forefathers... but I say to you...”* (Matthew 5:21-39). Was He reconstructing the Scriptures, or revealing them further? He was offering an application of the truth that went deeper than mere external behaviors. Jesus applied the truth to our hearts, our minds, and our consciences. He taught that right behavior comes from

right thinking, and right thinking begins with right believing. That's why He insisted, "*You must be born again*" (John 3:7).

For instance, when asked if it was right for Jews to pay taxes to Rome (Matthew 22:16-22), Jesus illuminated the relationship with the state by using a coin with Caesar's image to reveal that taxation was the reasonable obligation of a people who traded with money provided by the state. "*Give [back] to Caesar what belongs to Caesar [in the first place].*" But He also made that relationship an illustration of another: "*And give [back] to God what belongs to God [in the first place—your life].*"

You have been made in the image of God, with His purpose inscribed deep within your heart. Therefore, you belong to Him. You belong in His hands. His purpose should be your purpose.

Did Jesus come to start a religion? Or restore a relationship?

The KEY to understanding how to APPLY the Bible is JESUS.

Not just His words. Not just His deeds. They don't live in a vacuum. The context for understanding His words and deeds is to recognize His mission.

If His mission was to be a humanitarian, then His words and deeds mean one thing.

If His mission was to start a religion, then His words and deeds mean something else.

But if His mission was not even His own, but the mission His Father designed and assigned to Him, to reveal the Kingdom of God and restore creation to its original purpose, then His words and deeds mean something altogether different. That is, in fact, just what He said it was. "*[The Son] does only what He sees the Father doing.*" (John 5:19)

That's why a complete record of all of His words and deeds is not available (or even necessary).

The message that we need to know and follow isn't to be found so much in His words and deeds (profoundly meaningful as they are) as it is in Him, the Person—through the ways He related to God and to humankind.

He Himself said, "*You search the Scriptures because you think they give you eternal life. But the Scriptures point to me! Yet **you refuse to come to me** to receive this life.*" (John 5:39-40)

To begin to make sense of the whole Bible and find how it all fits together, you need to come to Jesus—that is, give up trying to master your own life and let Him do that.

I know, that may feel like you're abdicating your responsibility, but actually you'll be fulfilling it. You weren't made to fly solo; you were made for ongoing relationship with your Maker. He wants also to be your Governor, the Leader of your life, because He has built into you a Master Plan that only He can show you and guide you into.

Then, you need to bring all the remaining questions, and the ones that will inevitably arise in the days ahead, to Him, and ask Him to show you through the Scriptures what He has said about them and what He wants you to do with them.

You will not offend Him by asking Him questions. And if you are sincere, you will not wear Him out either. Understanding His answer may require more than just listening; in fact, it often requires applied learning (that means, practical obedience).

Will you come *to Him* today?

What would your life be like if you listened to Jesus more often and put into practice what He told you?

What would our church be like if we took the Bible seriously enough to change the way we speak and behave toward one another?

What would our world be like if more people practiced the words of Jesus in the power of the Spirit of Jesus?

These are things for us to prayerfully consider.