

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine hermeneutics, the principles that we use to properly interpret the Bible. Last time we discussed Hebrew poetry, parallelisms and some of the common figures of speech that are used. Dr. Spencer, what would you like to discuss today?

Dr. Spencer: I'd like to discuss the issue of context. Whenever we want to understand a passage correctly, we must consider the context. There is a famous saying, which goes something like this: a text taken out of context is only a pretext for a prooftext.¹ Which means that when I take some verse and strip it out of its context, I can use it as a supposed prooftext for just about anything I might want to propose.

Marc Roby: That practice is all too common I fear.

Dr. Spencer: It is. In fact, we've already seen one example of it. I mentioned in Session 39 that Matthew 7:1 is frequently cited out of context and abused. The verse says, "Do not judge, or you too will be judged"² and is frequently cited by someone who is trying to make the point that we should never judge others.

Marc Roby: You pointed out in that session that in 1 Corinthians 5:12 Paul commands the Corinthian church to judge a member who was committing sexual immorality and to put him out of the church. And I pointed out that in Matthew 7:15 Jesus said "Watch out for false prophets", which is an implicit command to judge those who presume to tell us God's word.

Dr. Spencer: Those are both good arguments against the notion that Matthew 7:1 commands us to never judge anyone. My argument from 1 Corinthians uses the first law of hermeneutics, the principle that Scripture should interpret Scripture, or in other words, that all of Scripture is a unity and cannot contradict itself. Your argument from later in that same chapter uses the context of Jesus' entire discourse to refute the view. But, we can even refute it by looking at the more immediate context of the verse.

Marc Roby: How so?

Dr. Spencer: This verse is in the Sermon on the mount, which takes up Chapters 5 through 7 in Matthew. The sermon comprises a number of short, somewhat independent passages. Let me read the entire passage that contains this verse, which includes Verses 1-6 of Matthew 7. Jesus tells us:

"Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you

¹ E.g., see D.A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2nd Ed., Baker Academic, 1996, pg. 115

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say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye. Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces."

Marc Roby: That last statement about not throwing pearls to pigs is a bit enigmatic.

Dr. Spencer: It is, and we'll get to that in a moment. But, first, let me look at the main idea of judging. First of all, this passage is not talking about judging in a formal legal sense, like serving on a jury. It is speaking about our relationships with one another.

Also, it is evident when you look at the whole passage that we are not prohibited from judging others, it is the *way* we judge that our Lord is limiting. In fact, he tells us to "first take the plank out of your own eye, and *then* you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye." In other words, we *are* to help our brother remove the speck from his eye, which certainly requires that we have judged the speck in his eye to be a problem, but we are to be sure that we have judged ourselves by the same standard first and dealt with our own sin. And we are also not to judge harshly or uncharitably, but in love. Our motive should be to help the other person and to build him up, not tear him down.

Marc Roby: It's interesting that Jesus doesn't say that our having had a plank in our eye disqualifies us from pointing out the speck in our brother's eye! That removes what I suspect is the most common retort that comes to mind whenever anyone rebukes us in any way, which is to respond by saying "Who are *you* to tell me this?" What about your problems?

Dr. Spencer: I agree completely. Whenever we are criticized, we tend to look for fault in the other person rather than listening to the criticism and responding properly. And, many times, people refrain from dealing with another person's sin because they themselves have sinned. We've all heard the old expression about having lost the moral high ground, and there is certainly truth to that expression.

But, Jesus does not let us off the hook so easily. He tells us to deal with our sin, and then to also help our brother. Matthew Henry, in his commentary on this verse correctly says that "I must not say, 'I have a beam in my own eye, and therefore I will not help my brother with the [speck] out of his.' A man's offense will never be his defense"³ (spelling updated). In other words, my own sin, my offense as Henry puts it, will never be a suitable defense when I am confronted with my negligence in helping a brother.

Marc Roby: I think this problem is common with parents. I've seen many parents who were reluctant to deal with sins in their children because they had done the same things when they were young.

³ Matthew Henry's Commentary, Hendrickson Publishers, 1991, Vol. 5, pg. 72

Dr. Spencer: That is a common problem, but it is also serious sin. It is compounding our own previous sin as a young person with the sin of not properly disciplining our own children now. Let me give a simple example. Every one of us has told a lie at some point in our life, so is it wrong for me to punish my children for lying? Obviously not! They need to learn that lying is wrong. The fact that I have also lied in my life doesn't change my responsibility to teach them what is right. Of course, I should also strive to speak with absolute honesty so that my children learn by my example, not just my words.

Marc Roby: We should all strive to be able to say "Follow me as I follow Christ."

Dr. Spencer: Yes, we should strive for that. But, we've drifted off topic. Our point was to show that the context for a verse is important. And a general principle is that the local context is the most important, although we must also remember the unity of Scripture and should never interpret any verse in a way that contradicts what the Scripture teaches somewhere else.

Marc Roby: Alright. Let's return to that enigmatic verse at the end of the passage. Christ said "Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces." What does that mean?

Dr. Spencer: In the context of the passage the message seems to be that if we have spoken to someone about something over and over and they have not responded in any way, then we should stop. They have proven themselves to be recalcitrant. Let me quote from Matthew Henry again. He says that "Our zeal against sin must be guided by discretion, and we must not go about to give instructions, counsels, and rebukes, much less comforts, to hardened scorers, to whom it will certainly do no good, but who will be exasperated and enraged at us."⁴

Marc Roby: That does sound like good counsel, although applying it obviously depends on the severity of the problem we are dealing with and our relationship to the person.

Dr. Spencer: Both of those things certainly do matter, and we need, again, to look at all of Scripture for guidance in dealing with any particular issue.

Marc Roby: Are there other examples you would like to look at for showing the need to consider the context of a verse?

Dr. Spencer: Absolutely. Let's take a look at Colossians 1:15, where Paul writes about Christ saying that "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation." Now, if we take that second clause by itself, out of context, we have a clear statement that Jesus Christ is the firstborn over all creation, which to our modern use of the word firstborn would seem to agree with the teaching of the Jehovah's Witness cult, which denies the deity of Christ. But, when we look at the next two verses, 16 and 17, we find there is a serious problem with this view.

Marc Roby: Let me read those verses. Paul writes "For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all

⁴ Ibid

things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”

Dr. Spencer: When you read those verses you see the problem immediately, don't you? If when Paul wrote that Christ is “the firstborn over all creation” he had meant that Christ himself was created, we would have a contradiction. Because Verse 16 tells us that “by him all things were created”, and to avoid our thinking that “all things” here might only mean the physical creation, Paul adds “things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible”, which sure sounds like it would include angels and any other spirit beings that God might have chosen to create. Paul then summarizes that “all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”

These statements are simply incompatible with the view that Jesus Christ is himself created, in other words, a creature, even if you say he is the most exalted of all creatures. He isn't just before *this world*, he is before *all things*. And he isn't just the creator of *this world*, he is the creator of *all things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible*.

Marc Roby: I find it disturbing that the Jehovah's Witnesses Bible, known as the New World Translation, inserts the word “other” in four places in these verses without warrant, saying, for example, that by him “all other things were created in the heavens and on the earth”.

Dr. Spencer: That is very disturbing, and downright fraudulent because the Greek simply does not have the word “other” there in any extant manuscript, and it is not possible to translate the verse that way. The Jehovah's Witness Bible is not a translation of these verses, it is a fabrication of new set of verses that say something very different.

So, getting back to our discussion about the real Bible, if we are going to do justice to the passage, we must ask what Paul means by the term “firstborn”.

Marc Roby: And to find out, the first principle of hermeneutics would say that we need to look at the rest of Scripture.

Dr. Spencer: Exactly. And when we look to the rest of Scripture the answer is not hard to find. The “firstborn” speaks about the one who has priority. The firstborn son is the one who is responsible to lead the family if the father dies. He is the one who is to receive a special blessing and a double portion of the inheritance. We can also see that the word connoted something very different to the Jews at that time because the nation of Israel itself is called God's firstborn in Exodus 4:22 and Jeremiah 31:9.

We also see the supremacy of Christ in Hebrews 1:6, where God tells his angels to worship Christ even though we are told in Exodus 34:14 and elsewhere that we are only to worship the true God.

And, finally, if we read the next verse in Colossians 1, Verse 18, we are told that Christ “is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.” Which again uses this term “firstborn”, but here it is clearly referring to Christ's position as the first to rise with a resurrection body. So, the

message is clear that when Paul refers to Christ as the “firstborn” in Colossians 1:15 he does not mean that Christ was created, he means that he has the preeminent position of a firstborn son.

Marc Roby: And we are told in John 3:16 that Jesus is God’s One and only Son, which contrasts with the fact that all Christians are called adopted children of God.

Dr. Spencer: That’s right. And, in addition to looking at the rest of Scripture, we can also look to other sources that tell us about the culture and history of the people at that time; that information provides the historical and cultural context for the passage, which is also important. When we do that, we find that the rabbis even called God himself the “firstborn of the world”⁵, which completely shatters the idea that the word must imply a created being.

Marc Roby: That is a very interesting piece of information.

Dr. Spencer: Let me give another example that shows how to make use of the cultural context.

Marc Roby: Please do.

Dr. Spencer: Let’s take a look at John Chapter 3.

Marc Roby: Where Jesus tells Nicodemus that a man must be born again to see or enter the kingdom of heaven.

Dr. Spencer: That’s right. In Verse 3 Jesus says, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.” And then in Verse 5 he says, “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.” It is Verse 5 that I want to look at right now.

Marc Roby: There has been a lot of discussion about what Jesus meant by saying you must be born of water and the Spirit.

Dr. Spencer: There has been a lot said and written about this verse. The problem is to understand what Jesus meant by being born of water, it is pretty well agreed that when he refers to being born of the Spirit he is talking about the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. With regard to being born of water though, there has not been general agreement. People have suggested, for example, that it refers to natural birth by referring to the amniotic fluid that accompanies birth. While that is possible, it doesn’t seem likely for two reasons. First, it would hardly be necessary for Jesus to specify that a person has to be physically born before he can be born again; that just doesn’t make much sense. And, secondly, there are no known sources from that time that refer to natural birth as being born of water.

Marc Roby: It has also been suggested that the reference is to being baptized.

Dr. Spencer: That has been suggested. In fact, it is used by some to support the idea of baptismal regeneration, the completely unbiblical idea that getting baptized causes you to be born again. But, even among those who do not believe in baptismal generation, it has been said to refer to

⁵ The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, Zondervan, 1976, Vol. 2, pg. 540

Christian baptism. The problem with that view is that Christian baptism had not yet been introduced, so how on earth could this have communicated such an idea to Nicodemus?

Marc Roby: That doesn't seem at all likely.

Dr. Spencer: No, it doesn't. We need to remember that Jesus was speaking to a particular person at a particular time. The conversation is recorded in Scripture for our benefit, but we shouldn't jump to the conclusion that Jesus was saying things to Nicodemus that were completely incomprehensible to him just so that they would be recorded for others to read later.

Marc Roby: So, what do you think being born of water refers to?

Dr. Spencer: John Murray wrote about this passage and let me read what he wrote because it is a wonderful example of making proper use of the historical and cultural context. But, before I read it I need to point out to our listeners that if they read the whole passage in John 3 they will find that this Nicodemus was a religious teacher and a member of the Jewish ruling council, which will be important to know.

Murray wrote that "We should keep in view the situation in which Jesus spoke these words. He was engaged in a dialogue with Nicodemus on a basic religious question. Jesus wanted to convey to Nicodemus an idea of religious import which would be directly relevant to the subject of interest, and intelligible to Nicodemus. Now what religious idea would we expect to be conveyed to the mind of Nicodemus by the use of the word *water*? Of course, the idea associated with the religious use of water in the Old Testament and in that religious tradition and practice which provided the very context of Nicodemus' life and profession! ... The religious use of water, that is to say, the religiously symbolic meaning of water, pointed in one direction, and that direction is purification."⁶

Marc Roby: Our listeners may not know that the Old Testament mentions ceremonial cleansing with water. In Numbers 19:9 we read about the "water of cleansing" which "is for purification from sin".

Dr. Spencer: It does help to have that background. And we see that the idea being conveyed to Nicodemus was that a person must be cleansed of all sin and be born of the Spirit. This also ties back into the prophecy of Ezekiel 36, as we noted in Session 41. In Verses 25-27 God says that "I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws." Wayne Grudem makes this point also in his Systematic Theology text.⁷

Marc Roby: That is a great example of using the historical and cultural context to properly understand a verse. But, we are out of time, so I would like to encourage our listeners to email

⁶ John Murray, *Collected Works*, Vol. II, Banner of Truth Trust, 1977, pp 181-182

⁷ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, pg. 702, footnote 7

their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org. And I look forward to continuing this discussion next time.