

The Chaos Ladder

Episode 2 - The double-edged sword

[Podcast intro]

Hi, I'm Steve Flowers and you're listening to The Chaos Ladder-- a podcast that explores how the Bible is not a gaping pit waiting to swallow us but a ladder for us to climb.

[Episode intro]

If you're a Christian and you're looking through whatever lens you use to understand the Bible, when you look at others who make you uncomfortable, do you tend to see them more often as enemies of God or as children of God?

[Main content]

A double-edged sword is a phrase used to describe "something that can have both favorable and unfavorable consequences."¹ It's applicable to the Bible because the Church has used the Bible to help everyone but has also used it to alienate and hurt others.

The edge of this symbolic sword that can *help* everyone is the only one inspired by God. It helps us cut through our self-centeredness and self-doubt so we both understand and grow in our faith. Like caring for a tree, it also prunes back the branches stifling growth so the Church can become healthier and stronger as both individuals and as a community.

It's best illustrated in how Jesus interpreted scripture. Throughout the Gospels, we find Jesus re-centering the purpose and use of our Old Testament by challenging interpretations that prioritized acting personally righteous above extending mercy. One of my favorite examples of this is the story of Jesus confronting the moneychangers in the Temple courtyard during the Passover festival. The story is often overshadowed by the intense physicality, even anger, of Jesus when He overturned tables in the Temple courtyard along with the misperception that he did it because merchants were defrauding people of money.² But some background helps us see what Jesus was really upset about.

The Passover festival was an annual time of pilgrimage that brought not only Jews from around the known world but also foreigners who believed in or were drawn to the God of the Jews. Everyone from outside Israel needed to exchange their money for local currency in order to buy

¹ Merriam-Webster Dictionary

² Mark 10:15-17

animals, such as doves, if they intended to make a sacrifice which at that time was an expression of worship. Jesus comes into the Temple courtyard and sees it filled with all the animal merchants, moneychangers, and Jewish pilgrims making use of their services. It's at this point Jesus "began to drive out those who were selling and... buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves." Jesus justifies his actions by saying, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers."

The Temple had multiple courtyards but the outer court was the only one where non-Jewish people were allowed to pray and worship. The Jewish people had other inner courts away from all the activity of the animal merchants and moneychangers where they could pray and worship. When Solomon dedicated the first Temple some 1,000 years prior to this event, his prayer included that non-Jewish foreigners would be welcome to pray because God would hear their prayers.³ The prophet Isaiah reinforced this purpose of the Temple as being for all people when he wrote that God said "my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples."⁴ It is this verse that Jesus quotes in explaining his action.

Jesus is upset because all the festival compliance activity was at the expense of the Gentiles who were left with nowhere to commune with God. Jesus' action was so the courtyard could return to its intended use, "a house of prayer for all peoples." Jesus draws the "den of robbers" phrase from Jeremiah. It wasn't a charge of dishonesty against the moneychangers but a cry that any activity that prevents all people from praying is as abominable to God as the hidden lair where robbers plot to harm others.⁵

Jesus' use of scripture never assimilated to interpretations that unjustly hurt others. We see Jesus do this over and over again in the Gospels with people on the various margins of his society: the Samaritan woman at the well, the woman suffering from hemorrhages, lepers, demoniacs, tax collectors, and even political extremists.

Our challenge today is to apply scripture in the same manner as Jesus so its application is for the good of everyone. A great example of that in recent times is from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. when he delivered his famous I Have a Dream speech at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C. back in 1963.⁶ Dr. King quotes from the prophet Amos that "we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream."⁷ Dr. King later quoted from Isaiah when he stated that his dream included "that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight; and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together."⁸

³ 1 Kings 8:41-43

⁴ Isaiah 56:6-7

⁵ Jeremiah 7:3-11

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<https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/i-have-dream-address-delivered-march-washington-jobs-and-freedom>

⁷ Amos 5:24

⁸ Isaiah 40:4-5

At a time in our history when many white Christian Americans were either indifferent or intolerant of the continuing racial inequality in the U.S., Dr. King, who by the way had a Ph.D. in theology from Boston University, mined scripture to reveal an inspired message on racial equality that was different or absent from what many white churches were practicing at that time. The way King used the Bible is reflective of how the Gospels reveal that Jesus used this edge of the sword to help everyone.

But as I mentioned Christianity has also used the Bible as a destructive edge. It's of our own making and, unfortunately, is the only blade that many people have felt Christians use. The history of Christianity is full of the Church wrongly wielding the Bible as a weapon against others. Here are some of the more egregious examples in our history--

- 1) The Crusades occurred during the 11th-13th centuries when Christianity declared Holy War against Muslims who controlled the biblical lands in and around Jerusalem. The Christian armies also persecuted and killed Jews. They killed tens of thousands of people and used scripture to justify their actions.⁹
- 2) The Inquisitions of the 16th and 17th centuries were the Church's judicial system throughout much of Europe and Latin America which it used to target Jews and others who they considered heretics. The Church victimized over 100,000 people and sentenced to death thousands more, including the justification of torture to secure confessions.
- 3) Christian communities from the 15th to the 18th centuries in Europe and Colonial America conducted witch trials which were used to execute tens of thousands of people for practicing witchcraft. The movement was primarily supported by Exodus 22:18 which states: "You shall not permit a female sorcerer to live."
- 4) From the 17th through 19th centuries Christians in America, Europe, and Latin America used the multitude of references to slavery in the Old and New Testaments to justify the enslavement of Africans. But the end of slavery did not end large segments of white Christians continuing to diminish Blacks, particularly in the South. From the 1870s through the 1960s scripture such as was used to support that God had made and chosen whites to be superior to Blacks.¹⁰
- 5) From the late 19th century to the middle of the 20th century, many Christian pastors renewed Christianity's long history of attacking Jews by using various New Testament passages to condemn them for being responsible for killing Jesus and for refusing to accept Jesus as the prophesied Messiah. It wasn't until after the public learned of the Holocaust that American pastors began to reassess the tenor of those statements.

Some might argue that Christianity today has progressed and does not generally act in such ways any more. But I would argue that a strand of a similarly hostile DNA is still present in the use of scripture by many Christians today. When Pope Urban II declared Holy War on Muslims

⁹ <http://media.bloomsbury.com/rep/files/Primary%20Source%205.3%20-%20Urban%20II.pdf>

¹⁰ Genesis 9:18-27

in 1095 to begin The Crusades, he called them “enemies of God.”¹¹ Many Christians today use that phrase explicitly or implicitly when they declare themselves “a chosen people”. The “chosen people” belief comes from identifying oneself with the ancient Israelites. In Deuteronomy God instructs that when they come into the Promised Land they are to “utterly destroy” all the people there, “(showing) them no mercy.” They are to do this because “God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people.”¹² Applying these phrases today is not only proof texting the Bible but continue justifying the rejection of others. And even if it’s not done using violence, it’s still done with the same intent to severely marginalize others in God’s name.

But the overall witness of the Bible is not to weed out the enemies of God but to see everyone as *children* of God. Paul was inspired in his letters for using scripture to advocate that Jew and Gentile alike are all children of God. It’s in the acts and words of Jesus in the Gospels that we see what this looks like. Jesus’ primary motive was never seeking out the enemies of God but instead meeting all people right where they were and calling them to follow Him just as they were. He constantly disregarded his own status in favor of elevating the status of others. And He never assimilated to traditions that unjustly hurt others or denied them to be part of God’s “kingdom.” That is the difference between the two blades of the Bible.

I hope you’ll join me for the next episode in which when it comes to the Bible, I’ll explain the problem with yellow lawn mowers... And, yea, that’s pretty much a shameless teaser. Thanks for listening to The Chaos Ladder. Take care.

[Outro statement]

The Chaos Ladder is part of StoriesFromAVillage.org, a podcast and essay ministry of Stone Village Church in Columbus, Ohio. You can find a transcript of this podcast on the web site.

¹¹ <http://media.bloomsbury.com/rep/files/Primary%20Source%205.3%20-%20Urban%20II.pdf>

¹² Deuteronomy 7:1-6