

Session 1: New Testament Literature & New Testament Canon Class Handout

In today's video lecture Dr. Ray Pickett of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago discusses New Testament literature and provides background information about the process of interpreting scripture. Dr. Pickett covers questions of context, both the contemporary context and that of the ancient world of scripture. In order to faithfully interpret a text, biblical interpreters need to attempt to understand the ancient world and how people lived. This lecture also provides a model for the interpretive process called the hermeneutical circle. Included in this lecture are sample questions an interpreter of Mark 1:1 might ask, and discussion of how those questions might be answered.

Dr. Pickett ends the first video with an exercise in biblical interpretation. Before moving on to the group discussion questions spend some time answering the questions he provides for Mark 1:1, which are also listed below.

- To what does the word "beginning" refer?
- What are the connotations of "good news," which is a translation of the term "gospel"?

Please feel free to use the resources in your Bible (a Bible dictionary, textual notes or study notes) to answer the questions.

Group Discussion Questions

- 1) Is it surprising to you that we don't know who wrote each of the New Testament books? In what ways does the fact that we don't always know who wrote the books of the New Testament change how you view them?
- 2) What does it mean to you to approach the study of scripture with humility?
- 3) The people who make up the Lutheran church come from many different backgrounds. Some of us were raised within the traditions of the Lutheran Church or another Protestant denomination and some of us come from the Roman Catholic Church. Many of us were not raised in a church or any kind of religious community. Given these facts, how were you taught to understand scripture as a child? How do you understand it now?
- 4) When talking about the hermeneutical circle Dr. Pickett discusses the world in front of the text, which is the world in our time and place. This world defines our sense of reality through stories, values, norms, symbols and practices that shape how we understand the world. As a group, make a list of some of the stories, values, norms, symbols and practices that have shaped the reality in which you practice biblical interpretation. (For example, one story that has shaped the reality of citizens of the United States is that if your work hard enough in life you will be better off than your parents. This story has shaped how those of us who identify as Americans interpret the stories of the Bible).

- 5) Dr. Pickett notes that there is not one correct interpretation of a biblical passage; instead texts have a surplus of meanings. Some interpretations, he states, are stronger or more compelling than others but in the end we are not dealing with objective historical truth when we are interpreting scripture. Spend some time discussing within your group the implications of a scripture passage having more than one meaning. How have you experienced a variety of interpretations of a passage in your own life and context?

Session 2: Greco-Roman World Class Handout

From aspects of daily living to a broader perspective regarding life as a member of Greco-Roman society, Dr. Sarah Henrich of Luther Seminary introduces the learner to the world in which scripture was born. Dr. Henrich discusses important topics such as an honor and shame culture, the Roman imperial system, and the ways in which early Christians lived within the confines of this society. Dr. Henrich points out that understanding the ancient world will help us to better know and understand the New Testament.

Dr. Henrich begins this lecture with a set of questions designed to get us thinking about our world and how it would appear unusual to someone who was not from here. Take a few moments to discuss the questions Dr. Henrich supplies, which are also listed below.

- If you had to describe to this person the world in which you lived, how long would it take you?
- What things would you single out to say about the world?
- Make a list of what you, or others in your group, would decide to say. What stands out about the list?

Group Discussion Questions

- 1) Dr. Henrich discusses the qualities of the Greco-Roman world that are very different from our own. These qualities include darkness, slowness, face-to-face communication, the importance of speech and rhetoric, the importance of letters, and also the fact that it was a hierarchical system. Given the many differences between our world and the world of the Bible, discuss as a group the ways that you can try to understand the world in which the New Testament was written. Spend some time trying to imagine what daily living in a world with the aforementioned qualities would entail. Use what you know from New Testament stories to help your group envision daily life in this context.
- 2) A culture of honor and shame permeates the stories of the New Testament. As you think through the stories of the gospels and epistles, can you identify any instances where the implications of an honor and shame culture are evident in the story? For example, the story of Jesus with the woman at the well (John 4:7-26) carries the overtones of the honor and shame culture of the ancient world. Just by talking to the woman, whom he is in no way related to, Jesus and the woman are bringing shame upon themselves because unrelated men and women were not to talk with one another.
- 3) The Roman imperial system, and the wars that were fought in order to maintain it, led to the spread of religion in the ancient world. Using your knowledge of the New Testament, what were some other ways that Christianity spread throughout the ancient world? Do you see any similarities with the spread of Christianity today?

- 4) Dr. Henrich points out that monotheism seemed narrow-minded to many ancient people because religions of that time period often had multiple gods that were worshipped. Therefore, the early Christians and Jewish people were considered unusual in their world because they only worshipped one God. As a group, identify ways that following only one God would have set Jews and Christians apart from their neighbors who worshipped more than one god.

Session 3: The Jewish Context of Early Christian Literature Class Handout

In this lecture Dr. Rick Carlson of the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg discusses the Jewish context of the ancient world and its influence on early Christian literature. He makes the point that if we hope to interpret the biblical texts it is important for us to understand more fully the Jewish context of the world behind the text. In this lecture Dr. Carlson discusses the identity markers of the Jewish people in the ancient world and how Jesus fits into this context. He also touches upon the interplay between early Christianity and the Jewish context.

Group Discussion Questions

- 1) Dr. Carlson names several dualities that exist between Jewish people who are living a righteous life, and people who are living in ways that the Jewish faith deemed unrighteous. These dualities include holy vs. unholy, clean vs. unclean, pure vs. impure, and Jew vs. Gentile. Jesus often crossed the boundaries between these dualities to make his point that God's grace and love exceed any limits that humans try to impose, even with the best of intentions. However, Jesus crosses these boundaries as a Jew. Dr. Carlson references Isaiah 49:6, and reminds us that the promise of being a light to the nations was not, and is not, reserved for the Church alone. We would be mistaken to assume that it does not apply to the Jewish people, God's elected, as well. Discuss what it means for the Church, both then and now, that both the Jewish people and the Christian Church are to be a light to the nations, helping to share the news of God's salvation with all people. Have you ever considered that salvation does not belong strictly to the Christian Church but also to the Jewish people? Does this change how you understand Jewish-Christian relationships? In what ways might this affect how you understand the stories of scripture?
- 2) Read Deuteronomy 6:4-9. This is the Shema and faithful Jewish people are instructed to repeat it daily. Now read the "Great Commandment" found in Matthew 22:36-40, Mark 12:28-34, and Luke 10:25-28. The Great Commandment is comprised of guidelines found in Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and Leviticus 19:18. The Law of ancient Judaism influenced early Christianity in a multitude of ways. As a group, and using your Bible as a resource, find and list examples of the Great Commandment being carried out in scripture. Also, take some time to list current examples of the Great Commandment being carried out in our world today.
- 3) Dr. Carlson points out those of us who live in the world in front of the text have been trained to view the Torah, or Law, as an onerous burden, and have come to understand first century Judaism as a religion in which its adherents must be obedient to the Torah in order to earn salvation. Dr. Carlson states that this is simply not the case. In a Judaic mindset a Jewish person is in right relationship with God because God elected, or chose, the Jewish people. Therefore, the Torah is a gift because by obeying it a person is given the tools to have a right

relationship with God and other people. Following the Torah is a daily response to God's grace. Using what you know of the Law in scripture, can you identify ways in which following the Law would encourage a right relationship with God and other people? One place to begin this discussion could be with the 10 commandments (as found in Exodus 20:2-17 and Deuteronomy 5:6-21). As a group, spend some time envisioning how the Jewish people in the time of Jesus would have understood Jesus actions in light of the commandments of the Law.

- 4) The last section of the video lecture discusses the importance of the Temple in Judaism, noting that it was one identity marker for the Jewish people in ancient times. As a group, and using what you know of the Temple from scripture, envision how losing the Temple would have affected daily and ritual life for the Jewish people. Given what you have learned about ancient Christianity through the video lectures make a list of markers of Christian identity. What are the similarities and differences between the markers of Christian identity and the markers of Jewish identity?

Session 4: Interpretation Class Handout

Today you will try your hands at interpreting a biblical passage. Gather into small groups of 3-4 people. Each group will use Mark 10:46-52 for today's interpretation exercise. Listed below are a series of questions that invite you to dig deeply into the story of the healing of Bartimaeus. As you work through the questions provided more questions will arise. This is a natural outcome of the art of biblical interpretation. The most important aspect of today's exercise is not to work through all of the questions, but to look closely at the passage and try your hand at the process of interpretation used to gain a better understanding of a given biblical text.

World in Front of the Text

This is the world in which we live and it defines our sense of reality. It is also the place we begin when reading any passage of scripture. Whether we are aware of it or not, we often approach scripture wondering what it means in our context. When we become aware of how we approach any given text, we can then unpack our preconceived assumptions about the text.

First, have each group read the passage one time through, then have each group spend time working through the following questions.

1. What is the first thing you noticed about this story?
2. Is there a word, phrase, or image that remains with you after the story is read?
3. Does this story make you think of any other stories you have heard before?
4. What does this story mean to you?
5. What kinds of feelings does this story evoke in you?

World Behind the Text

The world behind the text is the cultural world that serves as a frame of reference for the initial audience in the ancient world. Considering the world behind the texts invites us to consider what the text communicated to its first audience.

Have each group read the story out loud. In the first century world most people would have heard the stories of Jesus read out loud due to the high rate of illiteracy and the costs of written communication.

1. Dr. Pickett notes that it is important to ask yourself what seems most irrelevant, as that may be what was most relevant to the first audience. Are there words or phrases that do not seem important to the story? What aspects of the passage seem irrelevant?
2. Why might the crowd around Bartimaeus tell him to be quiet when he calls out to Jesus?

3. Is there a cultural reason the story is set in Jericho? What else happened in Jericho? Where is Jericho on the map of the ancient Greco-Roman world? What towns are near Jericho?
4. What does the term “Son of David” refer to? Are there other places it is used in scripture or in the ancient world?
5. What does the phrase, “have mercy on me?” mean in the ancient world? Was it used outside of a religious context? What might it mean in the gospel of Mark?

World of the Text

The world of the text is the world of the text itself, on its own terms, as best as we can understand this in our time and place. This is where the literary context of the passage is taken into consideration. A particular story is considered in relation to the whole story. Again, it is important to pay specific attention to what you don't understand, as that may open up a new path for interpretation.

Read the text through a third time and then work through the following questions.

1. What names does Bartimaeus use to address Jesus in this passage? What is the significance of using different names?
2. Where is the story of the healing of Bartimaeus located in the gospel of Mark? Where does this act of healing come in the greater story of the life of Jesus?
3. How do you think this story fits in to the gospel of Mark as a whole?
4. Are there other stories of healing in the gospel of Mark? Where?
5. Are there other incidences of Jesus healing a blind person in Mark? Where?
6. Are there other stories in the gospel of Mark in which one of the central characters is blind? Where?
7. Does this story or one like it exist in any of the other gospels? Anywhere else in scripture?

Group Discussion Questions

- 1) What did you think of this beginning process of interpretation? What did you find most difficult?
- 2) What was the most interesting piece of information you learned about this passage and what would you still like to learn?
- 3) What conclusions can you form about the meaning of this passage?