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Do Jesus' Words Take Precedence over Everything Else in Scripture?

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#STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about how to respond to friends who say that Jesus' words take precedence over everything else in Scripture and anything he didn't speak on isn't worth discussion, what to do with the Old Testament, and how to tell which of its promises are for us.

* How should I respond to friends who say that Scripture is all true but Jesus' words take precedence over the rest, and that anything he didn't speak on isn't worth discussion?

* If the Old Testament isn't written to us, what do we do with it? Why use it? Are any of the promises of the Old Testament for us, and if so, how can you tell the difference?

Transcript

This is Amy Hall here with Greg Koukl and you're listening to the hashtag STRaskPodcast from Stand to Reason. You are. Alright, Greg, you ready for your first question? Yep.

Fire away. This one comes from Scott. I am seeing friends say that they're focusing specifically on what Jesus says, and that they're focusing specifically on what Jesus says.

and disregarding the rest of the New Testament. They believe scripture is all true, but Jesus' words take precedence over the rest. And anything he didn't speak on isn't worth discussion.

How should I address this? Well, what is a little bit curious is that they have a different view about the rest of scripture than Jesus himself states in the red letters, red letter additions being those that have Jesus' words in red letters. I actually don't like that technique or that way of publishing because it does give the mistaken impression that Jesus' words have more weight than the other passages, but Jesus consistently cited the other passages every section of Old Testament scripture, the Torah, the wisdom literature, the prophets, the law, all of that as divinely inspired text. And if Jesus' words are divinely inspired and he believed all the words of the other writers who were divinely inspired in the same way that his words were divinely inspired, then there's no distinction in the authority between Jesus' words and any other words in the text.

And by the way, this is fairly easy to establish one of the ways that we have established the authority of the Old Testament is to look at the authority of Christ. And when we look at the Gospels, for example, as an historical account, in other words, not as God's word, at least initially, that's a conclusion we can come to, but then we look at what Jesus did, historically recorded there and what he said about himself. And so he makes exalted claims about himself and then verifies those exalted claims through acts of supernatural miracles that are justification for his claims.

They're, I think the Greek word is Samian and that means attesting miracle. So the miracle attests to the claim that's being made associated with the miracle. So when you look at that, just from an historical perspective, you see that Jesus does the miracles that attests his claims to be God.

Then you see what the God man, Jesus, says about the other texts and he gives them equal authority with himself. In fact, it's interesting that in John chapter five, Jesus says, if you don't believe me because you say I'm just a single witness, then believe the prophets who spoke of me believe the scripture or believe Moses who wrote of me, et cetera, et cetera. So he is actually contrasting his words, which aren't being taken seriously by the Jews with the words of the others, which they do take seriously because they understand that's holy writ.

So Jesus is clearly in that place and quite a number of other places identifying the full authority of the text. So those who are red letter Christians ironically are inconsistent because they are not taking Jesus' understanding of the other scriptures, the way Jesus himself establishes the authority in the red letters and in the New Testament. So it's inconsistent.

And then what bothers me about this? Oh, plus I think that didn't Scott say that his friend thinks that these other texts are true, but they're not on par with the things that Jesus said. Yeah, that's the part I don't understand. Well, look at, water is wet.

Okay, that statement is true. It's coming from Greg Kockel. That is no less true than Jesus is God.

If Jesus is God is true and water is wet is true, then no statement is any more true than the other. As long as there's no ambiguity is truth in that sense is a non-off switch, right? It either is or it isn't. And so what sense does it make to say, well, all the rest of the scriptures are true, but they don't have the same authority as Jesus' statements.

Now, by the way, I admit that some true statements can have more authority. Like I could say that the, I could just make a statement of fact of the world that doesn't carry with it any authority because there's no command given there. But nevertheless, on the truth matter, I don't see how they can be distinguished like this is true, but this is more true.

And if it's an authority issue, well, Jesus acknowledged the full authority of the Hebrew scriptures. So why wouldn't they acknowledge the full authority on par with the authority of

Jesus' words? I think what this sets up, those are legitimate questions that need to be asked. Okay, if the red words have the most authority, but those words give equal authority to the non-red words, then they all have equal authority.

It's just the way that works. Why are you doing this? Okay, these are the so-called red letter questions. And they tend to be progressive and postmodern.

And who was the very well-known red letter Christian guy who just passed away a couple of weeks ago, you know, Friday's here and Sunday's coming. You know, he did that famous thing about the present. You know, we dinner with him actually once in the 2000s down in San Diego.

Tony Campolo? Yeah, Tony Campolo. So he passed away just a couple of weeks ago. Oh, I didn't know that.

Yeah, Mr. Red Letter Christian. And I think what this allows progressive leaning Christians to do is to take Jesus' words, the red letter words and then read them in a way that Jesus didn't intend. And of course, if you have the other scripture that Jesus affirmed in play as a balance, you can't read these red letters in this progressive way because the other inspired scripture which Jesus acknowledged wouldn't give you that latitude.

But if you limit the scriptures just to the most important, that is the red letters, then you have like a much more limited amount. It's easier to manipulate. Let's put it that way.

Here's the irony too. Jesus never wrote any red letters. All of the red letters are the things the apostles wrote about what Jesus said.

And sometimes it appears direct quotes, other times it's summaries. All right, they're summaries of what Jesus said. Now, our doctorate inspiration is that it is the writing that is inspired, all graph A is God breathed, 2 Timothy 3. And so even when they are summing up what Jesus has to say, those are still the summaries that God inspired those writers to write.

Well, if it's the apostles who are writing the collection, or recording the collection of Jesus' sayings and what he said and what he did about what he claimed about who he was, why and what they are writing is deemed authoritative when it's applied to Jesus, why is it not authoritative when they are writing, not quoting Jesus, as Paul says, not the Lord, but I in Corinthian, in other words, Jesus didn't weigh in on this, but I'm weighing in. So why wouldn't the apostolic writings have just as much authority? So there's another inconsistency here. The apostles are writing authoritatively when they are authoritatively summing up what Jesus said, because they're attributing to Jesus that matters.

But they're not writing authoritatively when they are speaking based on what they learn from Jesus or from the Holy Spirit in application of the broader teachings Jesus offered. So there's wild inconsistencies at every level here and it just creates a mess. And it makes Jesus' teachings much more vulnerable to distortion than what ought to be.

And I'm also suspicious of this view. If Jesus didn't speak on it, it's not important. What is the famous thing that Jesus didn't speak on that comes up all the time in these kind of ethical, biblical Christian discussions? He never directly talked about homosexuality.

There it is. There it is. Of course, this is a big deal with red-letter Christians.

But I guess they have no concern about slavery or racism or child abuse or spousal abuse or a whole host of other things for which Jesus never had a recorded comment. Well, that would be a good thing to bring up. If they bring up any of those topics, say, I'm sorry, that's not worth discussion.

That's right. That's right. Because Jesus didn't say directly about that.

What gets me is that God spent so much time, so much time, setting up his moral law, explaining how he thinks about all sorts of different issues, training the entire culture to understand what it means to love, what is good, what is evil. He spent all that time, because Jesus was only going to be on the earth for 33 years. He couldn't accomplish all of that.

God had to set up the culture ahead of time so that when Jesus came, all of that background would already be there. That whole worldview would already be created among all the people there so that he wouldn't have to go through every single thing that's wrong. He'd build that, but rather that his teachings would be understood in light of what had already been revealed.

Right. Exactly. Which is why there's so many references in the gospels to those past things, whether it's the angel Gabriel or speaking to Mary at the Annunciation, or whether it's the angel Gabriel speaking to Zacharias regarding John the Baptist, or whether it's the other prophetic words that are given at Jesus' birth and a whole host of other things.

These are all tying the life of Jesus back to all this other stuff that happened. It's not a discrete account of a person's life that is meant to be understood as a whole, but as a continuation of what has been revealed before. And, and when I say continuation, not only depended upon what's been revealed before, but added to it to bring that all to fruition.

And to treat Jesus' language as if it was, is completely discreet, is to miss so much of what Jesus meant to bring to the world. Now, I think that might sound weird to people. Wait, I mean, Jesus did include everything? No, because he didn't include everything that had already been included by his divine nature, inspiring other authors.

Right. So what, another question I would ask your friends is what do you mean by Jesus' words taking precedence over the others? What does that, what does that mean? I don't see how that could mean anything except that there are places where it contradicts the past. So I would, I would bring that out.

In what way would it take precedence over something else unless it disagreed with it and you had to pick one? Yeah, appeared to disagree, which creates other problems if that's what

they're asserting. Right. And then I would say, well, what do you think Jesus meant when he said the scripture can't be broken? John 8. What do you think he meant by that? Because it seems to me what Jesus says is, it fits into everything God has revealed because inspiration means it all comes from God.

Why would he contradict himself? And maybe sometimes you have to work at trying to understand how these things work, but, but to say that it takes precedence over it is to misunderstand the nature of scripture. So I would, I would discuss what is their understanding of what scripture is, and then maybe you could go through the New Testament and see what Jesus says about scripture and how he refers to it and see if their view fits with Jesus to you, because what Jesus was generally doing was making the law deeper into your heart, not just an outward, you know, because what people were doing is they were saying, well, I can follow these outward commands. And Jesus was saying, no, because your heart is still wrong and you're still, you're still breaking the command in your heart in various ways.

But he, what he never said that the law was wrong or that God was wrong in the past and now he's right. None of those things make sense, but I think a lot of people don't really think about all these things. They hear these slogans said, and then they go along with them because they wanna go along with certain things, but they haven't really thought through it.

So I would challenge their view of scripture and their inconsistent view as you pointed out. So what we've done is charted out a number of difficulties with this view, and of course the goal is tactically now to take, expose those inconsistencies by using questions that probe and help them to see the difficulty. So let's go into a question from Denise.

If the Old Testament isn't written to us, what do we do with it? Why use it? Are any of the promises the Old Testament for us? If so, how can you tell the difference? Well, I never actually said, and I think that what she's doing is reflecting on something that she thought I said, and it's easy to misunderstand it. I never said the Old Testament isn't for us. And in fact, if I did, that would be directly contradicted by New Testament teaching, that the Old Testament was written for our instruction, but we have to, excuse me, take the Old Testament texts and understand them in the context in which they were written, and what the frame of reference was, that they were talking within.

And so, of course, one of the chief offenders that I've talked about was the Jeremiah Passage, Jeremiah 29:11. And people cite this as a passage. I know the plans that I have for you for welfare or not, whatever it is, I have a mental block about it, but the frame of reference, this was a promise that was spoken directly to the Jewish nation that was in exile and would be coming out of exile in 70 years, and God was going to restore the fortunes that they had lost.

And that actually depended, it's an interesting prophecy, because here's what I'm going to do, but they have to do something too. And it was based on kind of a repentance. And if you look back at the Deuteronomy passage, 31 or so, or maybe 31 or 32, and where the same circumstance is being anticipated, it says, when you seek me with all of your heart.

Okay, so this was something that, as a direction that God was giving to the Jews, in the Old Testament, Mosaic covenant context. So all of this applied the broader context, if you will, or the broader frame of reference was those who were under the law, Israel, under this particular arrangement with God. And now they are being punished, consistent with the arrangement that God has set up with them with Moses on Sinai, detailed in Leviticus and Exodus, and also a second time in the book of Deuteronomy.

And here they are now living out just exactly what God said was going to happen. We're not prospering you, we're punishing you because you've abandoned me, but there's a rescue long term. Okay, now there is all kinds of rich history there and rich things we learn about the nature of God that are helpful for us to draw from without at the same time, purloining, stealing, the particular peculiar promise to those people in that circumstance.

What I've been holding out for is not taking somebody else's promise. Jeremiah 31, whatever that verse. 29 11? I mean 29 11.

31 is the promise for, that's different. That's the new covenant. But that gets expanded to all nations.

As Jesus, I mean, we learn another passages, but not 29 11, there's no justification we're doing it. Well, does that mean there's nothing there for us? Well, not in the verse, because the verse is a promise given to a specific group of people under a specific set of circumstances. Just like, by the way, Genesis 12, one through three.

There you have a verse, a promise given to Abraham under a certain set of circumstances about God expanding his country, his offspring, making a country, protecting him and everything to an end down the road of blessing all the Gentiles. That's not a promise that he's gonna do that in my life. Expand my family.

I don't have any errors, actually, as it turns out. No directors, no physical errors, which is what was promised to Abraham. But there is a promise in there for me because what God says to Abraham is that this is going to have an impact of bringing a blessing on all the guayim.

Well, I'm a guayim, I'm a nation, I'm a Gentile nation. And so in principle, I am the subject of that, or the object of that promise, a recipient of that promise, hopefully, I have been. So when properly assessed, we can look at passages that have long-term application to us as new covenant Christians, and we can look at what God did in the nation of Israel and in people's lives there, and we can draw conclusions about God.

Look, David acted underhandedly. He committed adultery with Bathsheba, and he then to cover it up, he had her husband, Uriah, murdered, essentially, put him in the front line of the battle where the fighting was the hottest, and he got killed. Okay, he arranged for that so he could cover up his relationship with his illicit relationship with Bathsheba.

But God saw that, and Nathan the prophet came and nailed him on it. Okay, and so wait a

minute, what's that's Old Testament? Yeah, but what this tells us is God's attitude towards it, and it tells us about human anthropology, what even good people could do and try to justify and hide sin, but God doesn't miss anything. And as David said in Psalm 51, which is confessional of that sin, he said God desires truth in the innermost being.

He was hiding it, and finally man came out, and he had to admit what he did was wrong, and then he repented in sackcloth and ashes, so to speak. But there is an application that we can legitimately make from Old Testament text. So as you're talking Greg, I have, I can think of three categories of things that we learned from the Old Testament, and the first one is definitely, and this is I think the most important one, I don't know if I can say this is the most important, but to know the character of God, so everything we see happening, we see the promises he makes, the way he follows through with them, all of those things, his character through the law, through the way he punishes evil, we find out who God is through all of that.

That is the bulk of the way that we know God is through the Old Testament and how he deals with people. So if we're looking at the way he deals with people, he's in covenant with and his graciousness and his desire to do good for them, that all is true now in our covenant. And we see this in other places in the New Testament, maybe that verse in Jeremiah wasn't specifically to us, maybe that was in the Old Covenant promises, but his character is the same now.

So what we see now is God is working all things together for good to those who love God, and to those who are called according to his purpose. So we see that this still applies now and we can always find examples of it in our covenant. Though that word loving kindness in the Old Testament is usually a translation of the word *hesed*, which is referring to God's covenant faithfulness.

So that's gonna apply with whatever covenant is in question. So that's the first category. The second category is that the Old Testament gives us knowledge about love.

And I've said this over and over that the New Testament says that the Old Testament was given to us to show us how to love. What does love mean? Well, we can make up all sorts of things in our fallen minds that aren't actually true. But what God did was set down all of these principles about dealing with other people fairly, justly, lovingly, taking care of people, giving people what they have deserved, punishing people correctly.

All of these things are taught in the Old Testament. So we learn what it means to treat people well. We learn what it means to love.

Yeah, well, the commandments to greatest are love commandments. Love God, love people. But it's interesting in support of what you're saying that Jesus said all of the law can be summarized in these two love commandments.

But there's substance there, that's the point. It's not just love floating around out there as a disembodied sentiment. And sometimes people make the mistake of thinking, oh, well, that's

the greatest.

So that takes precedence over the others. No, no, it summarizes the others. It's not that love suddenly overcomes all of these other things.

It said these other things are teaching you how to love. So that's a summary of all the law. So that's the second category.

And the third category is that the Old Testament is giving us knowledge of Christ. It's setting up what was to come. There's all sorts of foreshadowing.

The whole way that the tabernacle is set up is to show the need for sacrifices and the need for a perfect sacrifice who would come and take the punishment for our sins so that we could be reconciled to God. It showed our need for God. It showed that we were sinners and had to be cleansed and forgiven and all these things.

So the Old Testament, this is where we learn about these things. We learn about who God is. We learn about what it means to love.

We learn about who Christ is and why He was needed. All of that comes from the Old Testament. And this is how we round out our view.

If we just look at the last bit, we're missing the whole set up. It's like coming in and reading the last novel in a series of novels and trying to understand it. Or the last chapter of a novel, right? Or yes, you come in and who is this character? Well, I don't really understand that.

You could make up all sorts of ideas about what the book is about without knowing what it's actually about. So we need that. So what I would say is, the question, how do you tell the difference? When you're looking at a passage, look at what is teaching you about God.

How does He treat people? And in terms of promises, the greatest promise in the Old Testament is the promise of who God is, because God doesn't change. So if you can get from any passage in the Old Testament who God is, that's a promise that you can depend on. So when God makes promises about who He is, that always applies everywhere.

But when God makes a promise to give something specific, you have to look at the context of, to see if He's making this promise in the context of a unique situation, or maybe under the terms of the Old Testament or the Mosaic Covenant, or He's making a promise more broadly to everyone or as part of the New Covenant or whatever it is. So this is how you can look at this, but it's so upsetting to me that people are dismissing the Old Testament these days. And I'm seeing more of it, like Andy Stanley is talking about and hitching us from the Old Testament, because I think part of it is, we don't really understand it.

And it's a lot easier if you don't have to explain it or try to make sense of it. Yeah, it's, I think part of the concern of Express in the past is people isolating verses and taking them as discrete

promises for themselves. And the question is, how does this verse apply to my life? And my response is, well, that verse doesn't apply to your life.

And they say, well, if it doesn't apply to my life, then why is it in the Bible? And notice how the problem comes up because of an artificial difficulty that happened hundreds of years ago that for a good reason, but created problems. And that is somebody added verse references to the Bible so we can find things more easily. We could navigate more easily.

But the fact is, there are no verses in the Bible and there are no chapter divisions in the Bible, not in the original. And so what we have to do is look at entire sections, narratives and see what part the narrative plays in our spiritual development, but first we have to look at what part it played in their spiritual development and then make accurate application. And by the way, this is not always easy, but it's a whole lot easier than most people make of it because they don't even do it.

They just look for the verse, God gave me a verse for you and then they cite the verse and they don't pay any attention to the things that you mentioned, the broader context. Who is it being written to? What is the purpose? Is this their promise as Jews in that unique, covenantal situation or is this the world's promise, you know? And so the distinction there is one you made. Does it tell us about the Jewish situation or is it tell us about the person of God because God doesn't change? If God keeps his covenant and his promise to the regarding Jeremiah 31, 29 rather, then he is going to keep his promise regarding Jeremiah 31, which is the passage promising the new covenant.

So the Old Testament is really important if it's properly understood. And the way it's properly understood is get out of the habit of asking the question, what does this verse mean to me because there are no verses in the Bible, look rather at the larger passage, figure out what it's about and then ask, what can I learn about God and the Jewish people that may have some application to my circumstance. But you can't purloin promises that aren't yours or warnings that aren't yours.

People usually steal the promises rather than the warnings. Anyway, there you go. All right, well, thank you so much Denise and Scott.

We appreciate hearing from you. Send us your question on Twitter with the hashtag STRS or go to our website at str.org. This is Amy Hall and Greg Cogle for Stand to Reason.