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Levels of Meaning

Are there other, deeper levels of spiritual meaning?

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Introduction

Does the Bible have different *levels* of meaning? That is, after we have seen the so-called surface meaning or literal meaning, are there any other, deeper levels of spiritual meaning? This chapter will explore this question. This is not an esoteric issue, of concern only to scholars. Every Christian who reads the Bible and seeks to find God's will for his or her life will encounter this issue.

For example, imagine yourself at a Bible study with a dozen other college students. It is your first time to this study and you are a bit uncomfortable. You have devoured several chocolate chip cookies and now you are concentrating on your Mountain Dew. A tall, skinny guy sitting to your right opens with prayer. You're pretty sure his name is Josh, but you've only met him once. After prayer he reads the passage to be discussed that evening:

⁸Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, "Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin." ¹⁰In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents. (Luke 15:8-10)

"OK," continues Josh. "There are more cookies in the kitchen if you need them and I think we have another bag of Fritos around here somewhere. So, what do you think this passage means? What is God trying to teach us here?"

"I don't know," begins a girl with blond hair, wearing a Point of Grace T-shirt. "But my study Bible says that the houses in those days had low roofs and few windows, so it was kind of hard to see in there. That's why she needed the lamp."

Jared, a guy you know from your English class last semester, is sitting across from you eating Fritos. He sits up and chimes in, "Yeah, and she has to sweep out the house because it's dirty. So we have a dark, dirty house with not much light. I think this is like the world, you know? I mean, when we drift back into the world it's like being that coin . . . not able to see clearly . . . lost in the dark and in the dirt . . . unable to see Jesus. So the house stands for the world and we are the coin when we backslide. Jesus, of course, is the one who comes and looks for us and finds us in the dark."

You are thinking that Jared makes pretty good sense. And he is a smart guy, you remember from the English class. You nod your head like you knew this all the time.

"So you're saying that the woman is Jesus," objects a big guy named Matt. "I can't go for that." Matt is a macho kind of guy. He lived down the hall from you in the dorm during your freshman year. Drives a nice pickup but is not really a rocket scientist. You think maybe he is kidding, but he looks serious about it.

"It's a parable," answers Jared. "It doesn't matter if they portray Jesus as a woman."

"I don't have any problem with Jesus being played by a woman," offers Jessica. She is really cute—short with big brown eyes and long pretty brown hair. In fact, you took her out once last year. You could kick yourself for not asking her out again. She seems to be interested in Jared now, however. Too bad.

"But Jared," Jessica continues, "I never thought of the house as referring to the *world*. When I think of a dark place where people can get lost, I think of the church today. I mean, just look at all the churches today that are not really following Jesus and just preaching psychology and stuff. You know, it's like that church in the book of Revelation that Jesus says is lukewarm—the one he will spit out of his mouth. The church really needs the light of the gospel today. And remember that all of those early churches were *house* churches, weren't they? I mean, they met in houses instead of churches like we do. So the house could be referring to the churches. It makes sense to me, anyway."

It's making sense to you, too, especially since she looked right at you and smiled as she finished. You nod your head in agreement. Any moron can see that she is right.

"But then what would the coin be?" asks Brian, a sleepy-looking skater wearing long, ragged, tan-colored shorts, blown-out Nikes, and a black faded Dave Matthews T-shirt. "And is there any more dip for these Fritos?"

"Well," responds Jessica. "Maybe the coin represents the true, faithful congregations that just seem to get lost in the midst of all those other churches who don't know what's going on. At least, that's the way it looks to me. The dip is right there on the counter in the kitchen, Brian, in the red bowl."

"Thanks," says Brian. He gets up and lumbers into the kitchen.

"And then maybe the woman in the story really represents the pastor of a true church," suggests Jared. "He is sweeping out all of the false doctrine trying to find the true believers."

"What's with all this woman stuff?" blurts out Matt again. "First she is Jesus and now she is the pastor. Come on, now. We're not a bunch of radical feminists. And hey, Brian," he shouts toward the kitchen, "if there are any more Cokes in there, bring me one."

Brian saunters back in with a Coke for Matt and a red bowl of onion dip.

"I never really thought about the house as being churches," offers the Point of Grace T-shirt gal. "If the house is dark and dirty, it is probably referring to our hearts. Isn't that what is dark and dirty in our lives? We try and try to follow Christ but we fail because our hearts are not clean. However, Jesus

PART 3: Meaning and Application

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comes and cleans our hearts, just like the woman in this story. He sweeps them out and then forgives us of all our sins. I like to think of Jesus as sweeping out my heart and making me clean. Isn't that neat?" She smiles brightly and then looks down at her Bible as she continues. "And look at this! This is really awesome. My study Bible says that the brooms they had in the Bible days were made of numerous two-foot-long straws bundled together and tied at the top. Wow! You know, like one straw can't do anything but when they are bundled together, then they are really strong. The broom is kind of like the Bible. I mean, like Jesus sweeps out our hearts, right? What does he use to cleanse us? The Bible, right? The Bible is also composed of lots of individual books, sixty-six to be exact, and they are all bound up together so that they will be strong. Jesus cleanses our hearts with the Bible. Isn't that awesome?"

You're thinking that the Point of Grace T-shirt gal is pretty insightful into this stuff. You wish that you could see something so deep and spiritual. You look down at your Bible but you can't come up with anything profoundly spiritual about the house or the woman or the coin. You find yourself a bit confused as well. Can the house refer to all of these things? Can it be the world, the backslidden churches, and also our hearts? Or maybe it just refers to a house. The woman had to live somewhere, after all. You wonder which one of these meanings Jesus intended. Should you just randomly choose one of the meanings? You're thinking that Jessica made a lot of sense, and you notice that she smiles at you again as she reaches for a cookie. You are trying to recall which meaning was hers. Oh well, you pick up another cookie and decide that perhaps you'll give Jessica a call tomorrow to discuss this some more.

Spiritualizing

Did you notice how arbitrary the various interpretations were in the story above? The members of the Bible study felt free to develop whatever meaning struck their fancy. None of them seemed overly concerned to determine the meaning Jesus intended when he spoke the words or what Luke intended when he wrote down the episode under the guidance of the Spirit.

In addition, none of these Bible-study participants seemed to notice the context of the story. The preceding story, for example, deals with the parable of the shepherd who loses one of his sheep, leaves his other ninety-nine, and searches until he finds the lost one, at which time he rejoices. The following story is the parable of the lost son, in which the father rejoices when his lost son returns. We will discuss parables in more detail in chapter 15, but for now it is fairly clear that these three parables go together and that they all speak of the joy God feels when someone who was lost comes to faith and is saved. They also stress God's concern over the lost and show the effort he exerts to find and restore that which is lost. Indeed, the last verse of the parable of the woman and the coin explicitly states as much: "In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

So Jesus is not using the *house* to represent *anything* specific in our lives. He is simply making a comparison. The woman is concerned over losing the

coin because the coin is important to her. God feels the same way toward us. The woman goes to great lengths to find the coin. God likewise goes to great lengths to bring you and me into the kingdom. Finally, she rejoices after finding the coin. God also rejoices after we are "found" and restored. This seems to be the meaning intended by the author. Keep in mind the lessons from the last chapter. We do not seek to create meaning; rather, we seek to discover the meaning that is already there.

The students, however, have missed the obvious meaning of this text because they want to find a deep, hidden, "spiritual" meaning. Their desire to find this deeper meaning drives them right past the actual meaning that Luke (and the Spirit) intended. Thus, in their search for the spiritual, they miss what the Spirit is saying through the text! Christ searches for the lost and rejoices when they are found. This is the spiritual meaning. However, it is communicated through literary conventions (grammar, context, and so on); it is not created by the whims of our imagination. The Bible is a spiritual book dealing with spiritual issues. We do not have to spiritualize it with our fertile imaginations.

Furthermore, when we attempt to find a deeper, hidden, "superspiritual" meaning, we usually find ourselves moving into an area of reader response where we are the ones determining the meaning rather than the text. In our zeal for "superspiritual" meaning we often miss completely the message God has intended for us—in essence substituting our word for his.

Occasionally in discussions on biblical interpretation a dichotomy is presented between *literal* meaning and *spiritual* meaning. Sometimes the reader is exhorted to search for the literal meaning and not the spiritual. We are uncomfortable with this dichotomy; indeed, we think that the term *literal* does more to confuse than to clarify. Many people use the term *literal interpretation* to stress that they believe the actual historical details of the Bible, especially the miracles. We certainly affirm the historicity of the Bible, including the miracles. But we think that the term *literal* is a bit too fuzzy. The Bible, as we have mentioned earlier, is full of figures of speech and symbolic language. The determination of meaning has to take this into account. Such figures and symbols reflect a very *nonliteral* usage of language.

For this reason we prefer the term *literary meaning*. *Literary meaning* refers to the meaning the authors have placed in the text. It reflects the type of literature used, the context, the historical background, the grammar, word meanings—basically everything we have been studying. This literary meaning does not preempt or replace spiritual meaning. Because the Bible is basically about God and his relationship with us, this literary meaning will be a spiritual meaning as well.

In other words, the dichotomy is not between literary meaning and spiritual meaning. The dichotomy is between the meaning the authors intended and the meaning a reader dreams up and projects into the text. This reader-based "spiritualizing" is the danger. Such "spiritualizing" occurs when we "discover" deep, secret meanings that the authors never intended. This kind of "spiritualizing" is not based on the text or the Spirit of God; it is a product of our imagination. Consequently, the question is not whether we will seek literal

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