



Minutes With Messiah

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GREATER IN YOU

Sometimes I wonder if I am too sensitive about some things. Then I think that when it comes to scripture, it may be good to be sensitive. For instance, when I hear a song that says, "Greater is he living in me than he that is in the world," I wonder if there is more wrong with that than merely changing the pronouns. If the writer is willing to change "you" to "me," might they also take the scripture out of context?

The scripture in question is 1 John 4:4, that is, in the King James Version and some other translations, rendered as "greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world." Others go gender-neutral with "the one" in place of "he." A literal rendering of the Greek leaves the pronouns vague, reading in English, "greater is in you than in the world." The context, then would determine who is in you and who is in the world. And there is where most people may be off in their interpretation. Even if you supply the "he" or "the one," the question is who those two are.

Even the context may not help. Without it, however, there is no way to even determine the meaning of the sentence. So what is the context?

Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world. Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world. Ye are of God, little children, and have overcome them: because greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world. (1 Jn 4:1-4)

Most people seem to take this final sentence, by itself, to mean "greater is he [Christ] that is in you, than he [the devil] that is in the world." Some might even believe that it carries the idea that greater is Christ in you than those people who are in the world; nobody in the world is greater than the Christ. It could even be read that Jesus is greater while in you than he was while in the world. While all of these may be true, that doesn't appear to be what the scripture is saying.

Perhaps the New Living Translation (which is no longer new and has never been a translation) is the one version that got it right. Instead of "he," or even "the one," this version uses "the Spirit" (with and without the capital).

The context of the passage is the testing of spirits. The contrast is between the Spirit of God and the spirit of antichrist. John concludes the section by saying that you will conquer because the Spirit in you is greater than the spirit in the world.

So what is the spirit in the world? It is the spirit of antichrist. Note specifically that John does not speak of "THE Antichrist" as a specific person; rather it is an attitude held by many people in the world. It may be a spirit that originates from the devil, but not necessarily. It is a spirit that may originate instead from the choices men are given about where they put their faith.

Ultimately, those who confess that Jesus came in the flesh are greater than those who deny that. If Jesus was not of the same flesh as we, then his death is meaningless; he is not a valid sacrifice for our sin. Even those (Gnostics) who said he did not come in the flesh still believed Jesus was the son of God. They just lacked faith in the efficacy of his sacrifice. If he did not have the capacity to sin, then his death was no more effective against sin than that of bulls and goats. In this the spirit in them was inferior to that in those who trusted in the power of the blood of Jesus to save.

A text taken out of context becomes a pretext. In this case it may express a very valid point, but there would be better scriptures to use. If we use texts out of context, even for truths, we open the door for those who would use such texts as pretexts for almost anything. After all, that is just what the Gnostics that John was arguing against did. That was why he had to say this in the first place.

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FORGIVING DEBT

It was the time of month that bills came due. They went out on the same day every month. The accounts were reconciled the same day every month. There was no excuse for not paying your bills. At least, that was the thinking of the head of the company. Let us call him Ebenezer, just because that name has already been applied to such a man.

Ebenezer was checking his books. The bills were paid; on time as always. Never let anybody say that Ebenezer reneged on his accounts! If you expect others to pay you on time, you had best make sure to make your own payments on time, or early. But there was a problem. Somebody was behind on his payments. This man (we will call him Jacob) had amassed a huge debt. That doesn't give it full credit. Jacob owed a HUGE debt. It was strange that Ebenezer would have loaned him this amount; it was even stranger that Jacob could have expected such a loan. How huge was it? In the currency of that country it was T10,000. Consider that the average wage for a day laborer was d1, and there were about d8,900 in T1. That means that Jacob would have had to work at an average daily wage for almost 244,000 *years* just to pay off this debt.

“Debtor’s prison is no place for children! Haven’t you read Dickens? I will find a way to pay you everything.”

Thanks to Ebenezer, Jacob was a rich man; a filthy rich man. Even assuming he had squandered some of that wealth, he had to still be as rich as Croesus. (And to loan him that much, Ebenezer must have been much richer than Midas.) What could it hurt for him to pay off a significant portion of that debt? Even if he couldn't pay it all at once, surely he had enough to pay most of it. If you borrow 250 millennia of pay, surely you can live on 1,000 years' worth of that. But Jacob didn't think that way.

Ebenezer called and Jacob came before him. He knew what was coming.

“Pay what you owe,” said Ebenezer. “I demand payment. You are behind on your debt.”

Jacob replied, “I can't. I don't have that kind of money in liquid assets. It is all tied up. I would need time to collect it. After all, I have debtors, too.”

Ebenezer said, “I'll tell you what. I will make it easy on you. You don't have to try to liquidate your holdings. I will throw you and your family into debtor's prison, and I will take care of liquidating your assets. Between you, your wife, and your children, maybe you will be able to pay the difference by the time the baby grows old and dies.”

“Debtor's prison is no place for children! Haven't you read Dickens? Just give me a little time and I will find a way to pay you everything. We are both men of business. You have shown me the light. I know I can get your money for you. Please, have mercy on my wife and children.”

Now, Ebenezer wasn't a total Scrooge. He had “seen the ghosts,” so to speak. He could afford a little kindness. He responded to Jacob's pleas.

“Jacob, you owe me a lot. It's even a lot to me. If I owed that much money, I would need time to pay it off, too. In fact, I once owed a large sum. I needed money to get started in business, and had to take out a loan. I invested that money wisely, and in just a few years I was able to pay it back, with interest. Now, I know you haven't made the smartest investments with what I loaned you. But, hey, not everybody has my business sense. What sort of loan repayment plan could we come up with to help you out?”

“Well, sir, I don't ...,” Jacob started.

“Hold up, Jacob. I know what you are going to say. There is no sort of arrangements that can be made that could help you pay off what you owe me. Right?”

Jacob just looked sheepishly back at him.

“There is one plan that would deal with all that debt. Only one, as far as I can tell. And I'm going to offer you that plan. What would you say if I just wrote it off as a bad debt? You don't owe me anything.”

It's a good thing Jacob was sitting down. Had he not been, he might have fainted. Such a huge debt, and Ebenezer was saying it was all forgiven; every T, every d. Jacob could continue to live in his lavish lifestyle. He didn't have to worry about debt; at least not his own. He could still live high on the hog (except that hogs were forbidden). Maybe in the lap of luxury would be a more appropriate phrase. Not only could he live well, he could lend money and increase his wealth with the interest. He already had a number of people who owed him substantial sums. That is why he felt he could, in time, pay off what he owed to Ebenezer.

When Jacob got home, he opened his account books. Now, a lot of people owed him money, but one, Bob, was behind on repayment. Something had to be done about this.

Bob could usually be found nearby. He was often in the marketplace with others who were either looking for a job, or looking for someone to lend them a sum. So Jacob went looking for him. Nor was Bob hard to find. Jacob spotted him as soon as he entered the market square.

Although Bob was talking to friends, Jacob ran up to him, grabbed him by the arm, spun him around, and demanded, "Where is the money that you owe me? I want it paid right now!"

"And how much do I owe you?" Bob asked.

"You know very well how much. I sent you a bill last week. You owe me d100."

Bob stood up and said, "But that's three and a half months' pay, assuming I don't use any for living expenses. How do you expect me to get that today?"

Jacob grabbed him by the throat and demanded, "Pay me now! I don't care how you get it. I don't care if you starve. I want my money, and I want it today. You are already behind in paying it back."

Bob pulled away, gasping for breath. He dropped to his knees, partly because he couldn't stand and partly to assume an attitude of subservience.

"Please give me time. I will pay it all back. All I need is time."

Jacob pulled him up and practically dragged him to the nearest magistrate. He lodged a formal complaint of debt. Without further ado, Bob was thrown into debtor's prison.

A debtor's prison is a strange concept. If you can't pay a debt you get put in jail. One would think that in jail you would not have the opportunity to work off a debt, and it would run counter to logic. A debtor's prison is more of a locked workhouse. Jobs are taken, and the inmates work as if in a factory; they get paid as if in a factory. The differences are that they cannot go home at the end of the shift, and their pay is given to the person to whom they owe the debt. Once that is paid off, then they are released. Such was the future Bob faced for at least four months. Probably more, because the prison had to take a cut for expenses in keeping Bob alive.

Jacob was perfectly within his rights to do what he did to poor Bob. Isn't that what Ebenezer had threatened him with? It was legal, and even (in a sense) just. Nevertheless, there were those hanging around the marketplace that did not like Jacob's methods. They liked them even less when the rumor spread about what had happened to Jacob himself. Here is a man who has been forgiven a debt of several hundred lifetimes, and he almost kills a man over a quarter-year debt! It might be just, but was it right?

They couldn't help Bob directly. But some of them owed money to Ebenezer. They knew him, and could talk to him. So they called on him.

"Ebenezer, we all owe you a lot of money. We heard what you did for Jacob. Now, wait. Before you say anything hear us out. We aren't asking that you forgive

our debts. We owe you, and we have been paying on time. We just thought you should know how Jacob took your generosity."

Thereupon they explained what had happened to Bob. They admitted that Ebenezer could forgive or demand payment as he chose. They just wanted to know if Jacob was really the sort of person to whom forgiveness of his debt was appropriate.

It was well known that Ebenezer could have a temper. Nobody present, though, had ever seen him get this angry. He was turning red in the face. His breath came in gasps, and he let out a scream like they had never heard. He sent one of them to bring in Jacob at once.

Jacob, likewise, had never seen Ebenezer this angry. Not even when he had begged for mercy for his debt had Ebenezer looked like this. He could do nothing but cower as his benefactor ranted.

"You wicked, wicked man! How could you do what you did to Bob? How much money did I forgive

A man has been forgiven
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you? You have no idea! You know it was a huge sum. You knew you could never repay it. And I forgave you the debt. Every bit of it. And yet you can't forgive a mere d100! Could you not forgive that paltry amount after what I forgave you? Well, if you cannot forgive, neither can I. I demand all you owed me."

Jacob could not beg again. He knew it would do no good. He even understood that it would do no good to let Bob out and forgive his debt. The damage had already been done.

Again, a trip to the magistrate. Again, a complaint duly sworn. Again, a sentence. But this time it was worse. There was debtor's prison, and there was the torturer. With the torturer, the debt would not be literally paid off in kind; instead it would be paid off in pain. Of course, before the torturer even began his job, all of Jacob's assets were seized and turned over to Ebenezer. It was the difference that would be horribly exacted.

The Teacher sat back and let his story sink in. It was, after all, just a story. But it was more than that. After telling it, the Teacher just spoke one sentence.

He paused, and then he said, "So likewise will my heavenly Father do also unto you, if you from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their offences."

From Matthew 18:23-35

HEART FAILURE

A coroner once said that she could attribute any death to heart failure. Gunshot wound; ultimately heart failure. Excessive blood loss from any cause; heart failure. Diseases from diabetes to AIDS-related complications; heart failure. Even that diagnosis known as Congestive Heart Failure is medical speak for “we don’t know what is really wrong, but it will end up with heart failure.”

If a church dies; heart failure. If a Christian falls away; heart failure. In the cases above, the physical death is due to the failure of the physical heart. In the cases of churches and Christians it may be the metaphorical heart.

Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love. (Rev 2:4)

Rarely does a church split except over matters of personal opinion or preference. Somebody doesn’t like the walls painted pea green (it was probably the cheapest paint available in quantity). Somebody didn’t like who got chosen for a particular position. These are heart failures. They aren’t problems with scriptural matters; they are problems with putting one’s own heart above that of the church.

Occasionally splits or fallings-away occur because of interpretations. Should women be allowed to preach? Should musical instruments be used in the worship of the assembly? Should the church treasury be used for certain things (besides pea green paint or carpet)? When these issues come up, sometimes there is a heart problem. It is not a new condition. The church has been splitting over interpretations almost from the beginning. In Rome some were vegetarians based on their interpretation of scripture, while others felt they could eat meat. Paul begged them not to let that divide them.

For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost. For he that in these things serveth Christ is acceptable to God, and approved of men. Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another. For meat destroy not the work of God. (Rom 14:17-20)

There is another way that heart failure is killing the church today, and it is going undiagnosed by those suffering from it. Some churches are baptizing many people, but are suffering from congestive heart failure. Some preachers are dying, and even spreading contagion, without recognizing that their heart has turned from love to hatred. Paul told the Galatians, “Do good unto all, especially unto them who are of the household of faith.” (Gal 6:10) But some today seem to want that to say “exclusively” unto the household of faith. If one is not a believer, they seem to think that it is acceptable to hate. “Boycott Target,” they will say, over a certain issue, while at the same time deriding those who would boycott Chick-Fil-A over a similar issue. It is acceptable, according to some, to deny service to a group of people, but complain that the church is being persecuted when others deny certain privileges to them. Still others would deny Christian aid to members of a religious group because of the actions of a few; and yet they complain when they are judged on the actions of so-called Christians.

Put them in mind ... to be ready to every good work, To speak evil of no man, to be no brawlers, but gentle, shewing all meekness unto all men. (Tit 3:1-2)

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