



International Bible Study Commentary

Verse-by-Verse Bible Lessons Thru the Bible

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John 5:39-47 Commentary New Revised Standard Version

Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further follow the verse-by-verse [International Bible Study Commentary](#). **Study Hints for Discussion and Thinking Further** will help with class preparation and in conducting class discussion: these hints are available on the *International Bible Study Commentary* website along with the *International Bible Lesson* that you may want to read to your class as part of your Bible study. You can discuss each week's commentary and lesson at the [International Bible Study Forum](#).

(John 5:39) “You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf.

Jesus told the religious leaders that the word of God did not abide or dwell within them; if it had, they would have believed what He told them. The Scriptures are the Word of God written. The Scriptures contain the record of God's acts in history. Not all of them, of course, but acts that prepared the way and pointed the way for the coming of Jesus as Lord and Savior of the world. The Scriptures also contain the record of God's words in history both to and through people such as Abraham, Moses, the prophets, and supremely through Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. The Bible contains the words of God that reveal the purposes for many of the works of God, and the words and works of God testify to Jesus, the coming of Jesus, the teachings of Jesus, the death of Jesus, the resurrection of Jesus, and even more about Jesus than can be listed here. The Bible reveals the reality of and truth about the nature, character, and purposes of God. As Christians, we depend on and teach the Bible as the true revelation from God regarding how people can receive eternal life through faith in Jesus, God's Messiah.

The religious leaders examined the Scriptures (the Old Testament) because they thought that they would have eternal life by doing so. However, they searched the Scriptures to reinforce their prior conclusions, traditional theologies, and the prior conclusions of others about God and the Law of God as their predecessors had done before them. The Pharisees searched the Scriptures to find out how best to apply the Law of God to themselves and others, and they thought that by applying the Law of God in every small detail that they would have eternal life. The Sadducees did something similar, but they only believed in the first five books of the Bible, the Books of Moses. Other lesser known religious groups did something similar; such as the Essenes, who copied or wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls. Even today, some people think they have or will have eternal life because they regularly study the Bible or adhere to and defend a recognized theology.

Looking more deeply, people search for what they do not have. Because the word of God did not abide or dwell in the religious leaders of Jesus' day, they felt an emptiness, a void, within them. They searched the Scriptures and applied the Law of God to the way they and others lived in the hope of filling that void. Even today, there are people who do not truly believe or have the word of God abiding within them; they feel a spiritual emptiness, and they sometimes study the Bible and try various theologies to find the answer to their spiritual emptiness, but they will not find fulfillment in Bible reading or theological study alone. They will only find fulfillment in Jesus Christ when they truly receive Him as their Lord and Savior and begin to love God the Father, God the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

The Gospel of John reveals the solution to our most pressing spiritual problems and our problems with sin. People must come to Jesus: do what John and Jesus said, repent of their sins, believe in Jesus as He has revealed himself in the Bible, and receive Jesus as the Lord and Savior of one's life. People will find the answers they seek in the Scriptures when they come to place their faith in Jesus Christ and become children of God—thus receiving the gift of eternal life. Jesus said that the Scriptures pointed to Him and in Him we will receive eternal life. The Old Testament pointed people to Jesus, and the New Testament does so even more. When we become children of God through faith in Jesus, the Word of God will dwell

in us and the Holy Spirit will help us love and live according to the will of God. When we become children of God, we are no longer empty on the inside, for the Spirit of God fills us and the Word of God becomes alive within us. In John 4:14, Jesus told the Samaritan woman, “But those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” Until we truly trust in Jesus and His word, we will not experience the eternal life that He wants us to enjoy.

(John 5:40) Yet you refuse to come to me to have life.

Despite the testimony of the Scriptures, the testimony of the Father, the preaching of preparation by John the Baptist (who testified about Jesus coming), and the testimony of the words and works of Jesus, the religious leaders refused to come to Jesus that they might have life, a life of forgiven sin and free of condemnation. Truly, a person does not “have life” until they have the “eternal life” that Jesus Christ came to give. Tragically for them and others, the religious leaders wanted to kill the Author of Life, the Giver of Eternal life, and prevent as many as possible from believing in Jesus according to the Scriptures.

(John 5:41) I do not accept glory from human beings.

Jesus told these leaders that He did not strive to receive glory, praise, and fame from human beings—that was not His goal upon the earth. In John 5:34, Jesus told them why He said and did what He said and did: “I say these things so that you may be saved.” Jesus came to save people from their sins and grant them eternal life. The religious leaders did not say and do what they said and did with the goal that others might be saved; rather, they wanted to receive the praise of other rabbis and the people. In John 12:43, Jesus said of the authorities who would not believe in Him, “for they loved human glory [the “praise of men”—KJV] more than the glory [the “praise of God”—KJV] that comes from God.” Many religious leaders achieve fame who do not try to help people find salvation from sin or receive eternal life. The same was true in Jesus’ day among the rabbis and priests in Jerusalem.

Note: The KJV and NASB translate the Greek as “receive,” and the NIV and the NRSV translate the Greek as “accept.” Compare John 5:41 to the words of Jesus in John 7:18 in all four versions, “Those who speak on their own seek their own glory; but the one who seeks the glory of him who sent him is true, and there is nothing false in him,” and John 8:50 in all four versions, “Yet I do not seek my own glory; there is one who seeks it and he is the judge.” Jesus certainly did not receive honor or glory from most of those who heard Him preach, especially the religious leaders, but His goal was to save people from their sins, grant them eternal life, and give them the power to become children of God through faith in Him.

(John 5:42) But I know that you do not have the love of God in you.

If the authorities had had the love of God in them or if they had had love for God, they would have been God-centered instead of self-centered. They would have been concerned to truly know God and know God better than they did so they could express their love for God by doing the will of God through serving God and others. Their love for God would have motivated them to want to know the will of God so they could always do the loving will of God in every situation. In John 7:17, Jesus said, “Anyone who resolves to do the will of God will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own.” The authorities were selfish instead of loving; therefore, they self-centeredly focused on learning and adapting the Law of God in ways that they thought would guarantee them eternal life. They did not truly seek to know and do the will of God; otherwise, they would have heeded the prophets, John the Baptist, and Jesus.

(John 5:43) I have come in my Father’s name, and you do not accept me; if another comes in his own name, you will accept him.

If they had truly loved God and sought the will of God, they would have learned about the true God from their Scriptures and they would have joined God in His loving and merciful efforts to save people from their sins. They would have rejoiced when God sent a healer into their midst who explained more of the Scriptures to them—as Jesus did. They would have

understood the prophets and they would have followed what the prophets taught instead of wanting to kill the prophets as their ancestors had done. They would have recognized that Jesus the Messiah was truly the Messiah that God promised, and they would have clearly seen how Jesus had come in the name of His Father. Instead, they never saw that whenever Jesus healed someone that was the work of their compassionate God. They did not accept Jesus and His way of life and teaching. They were self-centered and their desires for freedom from Rome, personal power, and prosperity were selfish. False Messiahs knew how to appeal to their selfishness when they came to the Jews in their own name. When someone pretending to be the Messiah came along that promised to free them from Roman oppression, as Moses had freed the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt, or give them untold power and wealth as in the days of King Solomon, they accepted them as the Messiah. In Matthew 24:24, Jesus warned, "For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce great signs and omens, to lead astray, if possible, even the elect." This indeed happened in a horrendous and tragic way when Simon Bar Kokhba, a false Messiah, led a revolt against Rome and achieved some independence for Judea between 132-135 AD. However, Roman armies destroyed Jerusalem once again with the loss of more lives than when the temple was destroyed in 70 AD. Pretending to be the Messiah, Simon Bar Kokhba took the title "Prince," and came in his own name and not in the name of our Father in heaven. The Jews accepted him and others as they had done in the past and as Jesus prophesied.

(John 5:44) How can you believe when you accept glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the one who alone is God?

Glory can be interpreted as honor. The Jewish leaders wanted glory from each other. The rabbi with the most knowledge of the Scriptures showed off his knowledge to receive honor or glory from his fellow rabbis and the people. The rabbi with the best arguments based on how much he had memorized the traditional rabbinic interpretations of the Law of God throughout history sought the praise and honor of those who saw him defeat others in debates. They did not seek the true honor and glory that

can only come from God. If they had sought honor from the only true God, they would have searched the Scriptures to learn how best to love, honor and serve God.

(John 5:45) Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father; your accuser is Moses, on whom you have set your hope.

The religious authorities really did not believe the Bible. If they had really believed the Bible, they would have believed Jesus. Before God the Father, Jesus would not need to accuse them of not believing the Bible; rather, Moses would accuse them. They had set their hope on their ability to tell people what the Law of God “really meant” so they could also force the people to obey them and their laws, but that was not what God wanted from His people. Using one of their traditions, they accused Jesus and His disciples of breaking the Sabbath, and in Matthew 12:7, Jesus told them, “But if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless.” Throughout Jesus’ ministry, those who thought their knowledge of Moses would save them demonstrated that they had no understanding of the Law of Moses, a Law of Love, and of the justice and mercy that flows from true love of God and others. In Matthew 22:37-40, Jesus told a lawyer, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

(John 5:46) If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me.

We learn from this verse that Moses wrote about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God. In Deuteronomy 18:15, Moses wrote, “The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet.” The religious leaders did not obey what Moses wrote and heed Jesus. After healing a man in Jesus’ name, Peter preached in the Temple portico, “Moses said, ‘The Lord your God will raise up for you from your own people a prophet like me. You must listen to whatever he tells you. And it will be that everyone who does not listen to that prophet will be

utterly rooted out of the people.’ And all the prophets, as many as have spoken, from Samuel and those after him, also predicted these days” (Acts 3:22-24). Speaking of Jesus the Messiah, Deuteronomy 18:18-19 fully reads, “I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable.” Jesus would not need to accuse them, for Moses would accuse them of not obeying him.

(John 5:47) But if you do not believe what he wrote, how will you believe what I say?”

Jesus concluded His reasons for doing what He said and did by telling the leaders that since they did not believe what Moses wrote, how would they ever believe what He said. In Jesus’ parable of the rich man and Lazarus, He concluded with much the same message, saying in Luke 16:27-31, “He (the rich man) said, ‘Then, father (Abraham), I beg you to send him to my father’s house—for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ He said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent. He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’” Jesus’ prophetic words in His parable proved right after He raised the human Lazarus from the dead. In John 12:9-11, John wrote, “When the great crowd of the Jews learned that he was there, they came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus.” On many occasions the religious leaders proved they did not have the love of God in them. In Luke 11:42, Jesus warned, “But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and herbs of all kinds, and neglect justice and the love of God; it is these you ought to have practiced, without neglecting the others.”

Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further

1. Why did the religious leaders search the Scriptures? According to Jesus, what is one reason to study the Scriptures?
2. What are some of the benefits of coming to Jesus?
3. What was missing in the lives of the religious leaders? What was one or more of the effects of this?
4. What did Jesus say about people seeking glory?
5. When Jesus spoke to the religious leaders, what did Jesus say about Moses and them?

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