

Is Jesus our Brother?

How to deal with "half truth"

The problem of focusing on "half" of the truth.

We live in a day in which religious people call attention to the parts of Scripture they like, and downplay or totally ignore the parts they don't like - even when what they're ignoring is the primary focus of what Scripture says.

This is nothing new. It's been happening since the days of the apostles.

Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. (Paul's warning to the leaders at Ephesus - Acts 20:30)

But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them--bringing swift destruction on themselves. (2 Peter 2:1)

Regretfully, they surround themselves with many followers - people who like their message, because it doesn't require them to change their ways. Such people are just like those the apostle warned us about:

For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. (2 Timothy 4:3)

This is one of the reasons that the Bible repeatedly warns us about those who spread error. This is also why Scripture praises the person who is willing to search it to make sure that what he is being told is true.

Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. (Acts 17:11)

False teachers do not always go around looking "false." Though some *do* advocate conduct that is contrary to Scripture, many will act very "spiritual." They will be quite sincere and convinced that they are doing what is right. Often, they will have a wonderful personality and will be very popular. The problem is that their message doesn't match the message of Scripture.

Sometimes they *will* say things that are true - but will do so selectively, omitting what they dislike, and leaving the hearer with a distorted understanding of God's Word. In this case, the problem isn't in what they say, but in what they *don't* say. They may even be aware of their omissions, but remain unwilling to change their message.

It is true that a person who is *not* a false teacher might become so excited about some fact in Scripture, that he seems to focus only on that one issue, to the neglect of other facts that are equally (or more) important. However, someone who wants to be faithful to the Word of God will change his ways, once he is made aware of his omissions. In contrast, even if the false teacher acknowledges the facts he is omitting (if someone confronts him), he won't change his message.

The issue of "Jesus our brother" illustrates this issue. We live in a day in which many people *like* the idea of having Jesus as our "brother," but don't want to hear about the verses which focus on Jesus as our Master ("Lord"), King or Judge. They like being told "God is love," but don't want to hear that he is also the "righteous Judge of sinners who refuse to change their ways."

If we are faithful to Scripture, we must focus on *both* - giving the same emphasis that Scripture has for each. We may be tempted to overreact and focus only on the "justice" part, when it seems that everyone else is focusing on the "love" part. But if we did this, we would be in danger of *also* becoming false teachers - though having the opposite message. If this happens, we have become just like those we are opposing!

To avoid this trap, we need to keep our eyes open to *all* that Scripture says on the matter. We won't necessarily have to look at *every* Scripture passage, but we should at least get a basic idea of what the Bible says, paying close attention to the various ways the concept may be expressed in the Word.

Is Jesus our "brother"? If we look at Scripture, there *are* passages that say something to that effect. Yet they are few in number, in comparison to those that describe him as our "Master" (or a similar term). This striking difference in emphasis should teach us something about the emphasis we should have. If our main focus is on the "brother" concept, and we ignore or downplay the equally-important (and more strongly emphasized) concept of Jesus as "Master" ("Lord"), we may still have some truth in our message, but will be a *half* truth at best. And *half-truth is a form of error*.

"Master" is the actual meaning of the word "Lord." This is the reason the apostles often described themselves as "servants" (or "slaves") of God. We *need* to obey and serve God - otherwise we are *not* followers of Jesus. Yet we dare not focus *so much* on the "master" part of the issue, that we forget that Jesus is also our "brother." We should let Scripture define the significance of each of these concepts.

The following study on the concept of "Jesus our brother" will illustrate how we need to look at Scripture and allow it to define our perspective. We will also accomplish two additional things: First, our study will encourage us to avoid the modern-day distortions of this concept, which are so prevalent (and perhaps so tempting to accept). Second, it may help us to avoid an *overreaction* to modern-day distortions - something that could cause us to rush into the opposite error, a one-sided focus on "Jesus as Master (Lord)."

You may also wish to look at some of the "opposite" concepts, such as "Master" ("Lord"). This would be beneficial, for such "opposite" concepts *complement*, rather than *contradict*, the "brother" concept.

Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil. (1 Thessalonians 5:21-22)

Is Jesus our "brother"? What exactly does Scripture say?

In the previous section, several Scriptures were quoted. In this section, you are encouraged to examine the Bible itself - looking not only at the verses mentioned, but at those surrounding them (as many as needed, in order to understand what the passages are saying). Note that, in many cases, the concept of "brother" will also imply "sister," especially when it is referring to a group of people.

A physical brother? A few Scripture passages use the word "brother" (or "sister") to describe the relationship that existed between Jesus and other members of his physical family. (Technically, they would be "half-brothers," since Jesus did not have a human father - Matthew 1:18-25.) In Matthew 12:46-47, we read about Jesus' mother and brothers wanting to talk to him. (See also Mark 3:31-32 and Luke 8:19-20.) In Matthew 13:55-56, we are given the names of some of his brothers, and told that he also had sisters. (See also Mark 6:3.) John 2:12 mentions Jesus going to a wedding feast with them. John 7:3-5 tells us that Jesus' brothers did not believe in who he was, and that they misunderstood the reasons he did things. (Their views apparently changed after Jesus' resurrection.)

A spiritual brother? Most of the time, when people refer to Jesus as our "brother," they are not focusing on the issue of his relationship to other humans in his biological family. Nor are they using the word in a more generalized sense, such as "we are all brothers (and sisters) in the human race." Instead, they are focusing on a spiritual relationship, often saying what people *want* to hear, rather than presenting it the way Scripture does.

As with any other statement about our relationship to Jesus Christ, we must define terms the way Scripture does. To do otherwise means that we have become false teachers who distort the truth.

In Hebrews 2:10-18, we read about Jesus becoming like his "brothers," in order to make atonement for their sins. Perhaps this is one of the passages people refer to, implying that, if we are *his* brothers (and sisters), then he is *ours*. But if so, we should carefully study this passage in order to understand who these "brothers" are. Verse 11 describes them as the ones who are being made "holy" (that is, set apart *from* sin and *to* God and godliness). Hebrews 3:1 reinforces this idea. Between these two verses, we read about how Jesus became like his "brothers," in order to make atonement for their sins. By *his* death, he paid the debt incurred by *their* sins.

Romans 8:29 describes Jesus as the "firstborn among many brothers," implying that he is part of that group described as "brothers" - the *first* of them. The previous verses define this "brother" concept, tell us who belongs to that category, and explain how they got there. Who are Jesus' brothers? Those who have become "sons" of God, by being *adopted* into God's family. (See

verse 23; also Ephesians 1:5.) This word "adopted" is very significant. It is important to realize that people are not *naturally* a part of God's family; we need brought into it by God. People are not *naturally* Jesus' brothers (in the sense that the word is used here), but need to brought into that relationship by God.

Jesus himself tells us who his brothers and sisters are. In Matthew 12:46-47, Jesus' *physical* brothers were looking for him. Jesus used this opportunity to teach the people about a different type of family - one that continues past death and into eternity. In verses 48-50, he pointed to those who were following him - his "disciples" - and said that *all* who do the will of the Father are members of his family. See also Mark 3:31-35 and Luke 8:19-21 (parallel passages).

It is highly instructive for us to examine the word "disciple," which occurs in the above passages. It refers to someone who is willing to pay attention to what Jesus says and obey him - someone who is a "follower" of Jesus. It refers to a person who has rejected his own values, motives and lifestyle, and who now holds on to Jesus' values, motives and lifestyle. It does not refer to just *anyone*.

One last passage will be briefly mentioned: In Matthew 25:31-46, we read about people being judged based in part on how they treated Jesus' "brothers." The word "brother" isn't defined in the passage, but we should note that Jesus is described as the King who will be the righteous Judge over all. The passage warns us that many will go into eternal punishment, because of what they did (or didn't) do (v. 46). Any concept of "Jesus our brother" that goes against this fact, or that downplays the role of Jesus as King is a false concept and a distortion.

What must we conclude?

Scripture is very clear and precise. Jesus is not *everybody's* "brother." He is a "brother" to some, but only to those who have become part of his family. Merely *claiming* that Jesus is your "brother" doesn't cause it to become true.

From God's perspective, the term belongs only to those he calls into his kingdom. From the "human responsibility" perspective, it belongs only those who are willing to follow Jesus, to obey him, and to live a holy (God-honoring) life. The "disciple" concept shows us that it applies only to those who are willing to accept Jesus as their *master* - the actual meaning of the word "Lord." People who do this are "servants" or "slaves" of their Master (Lord), the King of Kings; but they are also his "brothers" - people who have been adopted into the family of God, and who will rule with Jesus (their brother) for all eternity.