

Bite Size Bible Study

Us vs. Them #96

By Pastor Lee

We have seen in our study of Joseph that seeing a story through the collectivist's eyes brings a new perspective to our understanding. It brings to our attention that everyone doesn't necessarily think the same way we do? Naturally then, when we see other cultures acting differently, we assume our culture is the norm, the baseline, the standard. This makes their way different and quite strange to us.

A personal story from the authors of "Misreading scripture with individualist eyes" goes like this: *I was teaching in Indonesia. I was surprised by how many students left test questions unmarked, even multiple-choice questions. As I handed back graded exams, I commented to a student, "Why didn't you select an answer on question number three?" He looked up and said, "I didn't know the answer." "You should have at least guessed," I replied. He was appalled. "What if I accidentally guessed the correct answer? I would be implying I knew the answer when I didn't. That would be dishonest!" --- Now it was my turn to be surprised.*

Before he responded, he realized that he was about to argue the student to a lower standard of ethics. His Christian standard of honesty had not seemed to apply in this situation, when clearly it did.

When I (Lee) was in college, I was able to guess the correct answer most of the time on multiple choice and true false tests, because I had been trained as an educator in the ways multiple choice test were constructed. I thought it was fun to not know the answer but able to guess it anyway. It became a "Me vs. Them" game. Ethically this was probably wrong because it made me look like I was smarter than I was.

Like so many things in our culture, they are buried so deep down that we never even think about them. In fact, the most important things in our cultures are usually buried the deepest, way below anything we are really aware of and yet influencing everything above them. The collectivist and individualist distinction is one of these things. We are usually not aware of it, and so in both collective and individualist cultures, this orientation almost always goes without being said.

We individualists in western civilizations often grumble about individualism, but while we grumble about some of the effects of individualism, we rarely talk about the core assumptions that underpin them. We don't grumble about being an individual, we take that "to be self evident".

Likewise, collectives grumble about "People always think they have a right to get involved in my life and give me their opinions," or, "I always have to follow the expectations of others in my family, not what I want to do." But, they don't grumble about seeing themselves as "we" because it is buried very deeply in their culture.

We all assume it is simply the way the world is. While we don't like some of this, we can't imagine another way of thinking about it. Even if we can sometimes see some fruit (both good and bad) in our cultures, we rarely imagine there is another way entirely.

We Western individualists might be surprised to learn that our modern Western culture is the less common view. The global normal is more similar to the ancient and modern Mediterranean cultures than our Western culture.

That doesn't mean our Western culture is a plague on the world, it is just one way to live – not right or wrong. We can function quite nicely with our view without needing to know anything about the others – unless we interact with one. We don't have to know anything about how our culture compares with ancient biblical cultures unless we want to read the Bible better. It was written in a collectivist world, so it would help us to learn a bit about collectivist cultures. Collectivism is so deep in the culture of the biblical writers that they rarely say so directly. It goes without being said, so we can miss it. To exacerbate the scenario, we often fill in what went without being said in their world (collectivism) with what goes without being said in ours (individualism).

At the end of Paul's the letter to the Thessalonians, he writes; *"Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus"* (I Thess 5:16-18). We interpret it as being an admonition to us as an individual, but this letter was to the Thessalonian congregation. What was it meant to say to them as collectivists? Once we see the core of what it meant to them we can better interpret it into our lives. Did Paul mean to spend every minute of every day praying? No. In their culture they would pray a very short prayer very often throughout the day to give thanks to God for whatever they were able to be doing.

Recognizing the collectivist nature of the biblical world helps us to be better readers of the Bible, and more importantly, better able to apply the Scriptures to our individualist lives.

Cornerstone Community Church

PO Box 654 Lemon Grove, CA 91945-0654 – www.cornerstonecommunityonline.org