

How To Interpret The Bible

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I want to talk about hermeneutics. I want to do a class on hermeneutics. I honestly believe that we could do a whole week like this on hermeneutics, that we should just teach hermeneutics. It's important for Christians to have it, it's especially important for spiritual leaders and pastors to have it; so I would love to see a whole week of hermeneutics. That would be fantastic.

What I'm going to share with you is kindergarten. It's probably preschool hermeneutics. It's real elementary, but it'll whet your appetite and maybe stimulate some great conversation. I know we haven't really asked questions while I'm teaching, but you're welcome to do that; so if you raise your hand, I'll call on you. I'm glad to do this. This is just a class. This is casual. It's just guys talking, and let's talk about hermeneutics.

The term "hermeneutics" refers to the science and the art of interpreting Scripture. Homiletics is the science and art of preaching Scripture, teaching Scripture. It comes from the Greek god Hermes who interpreted the will of the gods to the Greeks. It's just used for us to be able to use the concept of interpreting Scripture.

Have you ever been in a situation, maybe in a home Bible study, where someone is sharing something and someone else will say, "Well, what's your view of this passage?" or "What do you believe it means?" Maybe you have five people say, "This is what I think it means," or "This is what I think it means." I remember talking to one fellow one time, an unbeliever, in a mall. I was just quoting Scripture, literally just quoting Scripture verbatim from King James, obviously, but I was quoting Scripture. He just kept saying, "Well, that's your interpretation." "I didn't interpret anything, I actually quoted. You can look up the verse in the text what Jesus said out of His own mouth," but he just dismissed it and kept, "Well, that's just your interpretation." We sometimes feel people saying that the Bible is difficult, it's dark, it's hard to interpret, it's hard to understand, and there's truth to that and not truth to that. But God's Word is clear. I talked about Psalm 19, the clarity of Scripture, so God's Word is clear, and we can understand it, and I think it's meant by God for us to understand; but on the other hand, it's not clear and there's a challenge there.

There's a great illustration of the need for interpreting Scripture in Acts 8 when Philip the evangelist went toward Gaza and encountered the Ethiopian eunuch. Do you remember that? He was reading the scroll in his chariot from Isaiah 53. Philip heard him and ran up to him, and what did Philip say? "Do you understand what you're reading?" And the Ethiopian eunuch said, "How can I unless someone explains it to me, someone interprets it for me?" So, Philip jumps up into the chariot and immediately starts explaining and expounding the passage in Isaiah that leads to the Ethiopian's conversion.

Some of the problems of interpreting Scripture are five things. First, a time gap. It was a long, long time ago when these Scriptures were written, and there's a big time gap—cultures change, and issues change. So, we have this huge time gap we've got to span. Secondly, we have a

space gap or geographical gap. They were in a different part of the world at a different time, and here we are in the Western world. Thirdly, there's what's called the customs gap. You know, every Bible student should study the manners and customs of the Bible. Some verses in the Bible you can't really interpret or understand unless you understand the manners and the customs of what's going on at that time and in that culture, that place. Fourthly, we talk about the language gap. Very few of us can really read Hebrew or Greek, so we have the translation language gap. Fifthly, the big gap is the spiritual gap, so we have to be born of the Spirit to be able to interpret the Word of God.

I want to start with the qualifications for interpreting the Bible. As I said, this is basic kind of kindergarten level A-B-Cs, but it's important. First, you must be born again. This is under the heading, "Qualifications for Interpreting the Bible," you must be born again, 1 Corinthians 2:14, "But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." We all meet people, "I've read the Bible. It makes no sense." Have you ever hear Bill Maher teach on the Bible? Have you ever heard Bill Maher quote Scripture or explain...Bill Maher expounding Scripture, give me a break. You've got to be born again. You've got to be regenerated. You don't even have the Spirit of God and you think that you can explain Scripture. So, first, you must be born again.

Secondly, you must also approach the Bible with reverence for and interest in God and His Word. You must have a reverence for and an interest in God and His Word. Without that, you're not going to properly interpret Scripture. Thirdly, you must come with prayerful dependence and humility. No interpreter is infallible—don't forget that—but we come humbly, dependently, and relying on the Word of God. It's so very, very important. Fourthly, the Bible must be approached with a willingness to obey its teaching. That's another prerequisite to interpreting the Bible. If you're going to read the Bible, are you ready to obey the Bible. Sometimes we don't understand stuff because we don't want to because we don't want to obey it. D.L. Moody once said, and I've quoted it for years and so often, he says, "Every Christian's Bible should be bound in shoe leather to remind them that the Word of God is to be lived out in their daily life." So, if you're going to study the Bible, ask yourself, "Am I ready to obey?"

Fifthly, we must have dependence on the Holy Spirit. Jesus described the Comforter, the *parákletos*, who would come and comfort us but also lead and guide us into all truth. He told the apostles that He would remind them of all things that He had spoken unto them. I read something, and I'm not quoting anything or have a quote from John Stott, but years ago reading Stott, I'm not sure where I got it or what book I was reading, he talked about interpreting Scripture and he talked about the Bible—listen carefully—having two natures. Terry used the word hypostatic union, I'm worried about putting my hands in my pockets, and I'm worried about using the word "hypostatic union." Anyway, I'll use it.

"Hypostatic union" means that Christ had two natures, one Person; so does the written Word. The written Word is like a hypostatic union—it has the word of men, but it's the Word of God. Here's a cool thought. Since it's the word of men, we study it like we would any other book—

with our minds taking grammar, history, culture, context, everything that we would use when we study any other book or literature or reading a newspaper—it's written by men. When people criticize the Bible and say, "Oh, the Bible was written by men. It's just written by men." Yes, yes it was written by men, and it has geography and history. It has all of the different genres of literature, and we have to put our thinking caps on and get our tools out, as we've been talking about books and tools, and we have to engage our minds. It's not unspiritual to think and use your minds to study the Word of God. We should study it like any other book, but it is also the Word of God. It has two natures. It's the Word of God. And, because it's the Word of God—this is the cool part—we study it like no other book by getting on our knees and praying and asking the Holy Spirit to give us what's called illumination in order that we might have transformation.

We talked about inspiration, we talked about infallibility, we talked about clarity, but now we're talking about illumination—the Word of God being illuminated by the author, the Holy Spirit. So, we have to be born again, we have to be reverent, we have to be ready to be obedient, and we have to rely upon the Holy Spirit. I like the idea that the Bible has two natures, study it like any other book, study it like no other book.

If I'm going to read a Reader's Digest article, I don't get on my knees and pray and ask the Holy Spirit to reveal the truth of it to me. If I'm going to read the newspaper, I don't get on my knees and ask God to open my eyes and show me truth, I just read it like I would any other book. But when I'm reading the Word of God, I must get on my knees and seek the Lord and study His Word in humble reverence and dependence upon the Holy Spirit.

Let's jump from the general introduction of the qualifications of interpreting the Bible to the science and art of interpreting, hermeneutics. Here are some real basics. First, work from the assumption that the Bible is the authority. You work from the assumption the Bible is the authority. I know we've been kind of hammering that home in different aspects, different ways. The church is not the authority. Church history is not the authority. We can learn from that and it has some authority, but it's not ultimate authority, and it's not the inerrant, inspired by God authority. The Pope is not the authority. The pastor is not the authority. Tradition is not the authority. Reason, intellect, is not the authority. Experience is not the authority. I'll talk more about that in a little bit.

Sometimes liberalism creeps into the church because we shift to intellect over the authority of God's Word, "Well, I don't understand that. That doesn't make sense. It must be allegorical. It must be just a myth. It must be myth, it can't be real. It can't be history," and we let our intellect get in the way of studying God's Word, which we shouldn't do. The ultimate authority, absolute final authority, is the inerrant, infallible, inspired Word of God. Amen? And, that's how we should approach the Bible. If we don't, we're not going to be able to properly interpret it.

Secondly, the Bible best interprets itself, and Scripture best explains Scripture. Use Scripture to explain Scripture. Let me give you an example. In the Old Testament book of Isaiah 7:14, the word translated "virgin" we understand could be actually translated because of the Hebrew,

young maiden. A lot of people who try to deny the virgin birth will actually say, "Well, there you have it. It's young maiden, and we don't have to believe in the virgin birth." So, when you go to the New Testament, in Matthew 1:23, the Greek word used there for "Behold, a virgin shall"—conceive and bear a child and—"they shall call his name Emmanuel . . . God with us," can only be used for a virgin that we would use as the word, so Matthew writing from quoting Isaiah uses the actual word "virgin," so you're letting Scripture interpret Scripture.

I know we've mentioned this book three or four times already, here's my copy that I have of this book, this is The Treasury Of Scripture Knowledge introduced by R.A. Torrey. I believe this probably you can get on the computer nowadays, but this, by the way, as I said is a book Chuck Smith highly recommended, Chuck Smith used. John MacArthur used this book, and I use it. The nice thing about this book is that it's laid out books of the Bible. It's laid out Genesis to Revelation, every chapter, every verse. So, you go to the book, the chapter, the verse, and each verse in the Bible has all these cross-references. Sometimes when I'm reading John MacArthur and I hear his cross-references coming out like a machine gun, just firing verses at you, and "Where does he get all those? He must spend hours and hours looking them up," but they're all in this book that is a great resource to be able to compare Scripture with Scripture. When you interpret Scripture, you want to compare Scripture with Scripture to be able to cast light and clarity.

Here's a principle: The clear Scriptures should interpret the unclear. If you've got a Scripture that's not clear, you're not going to build a doctrine on that Scripture to the neglect of a clear passage. If you have a passage that's very clear...it's very common to find a situation where, "Well, you don't know how to interpret this verse, but we do know this is clear." So, we camp on what is clear. Let the clear interpret the unclear. It's very, very important. So, the Bible interprets itself, Scripture best explains Scripture. Let the clear interpret the unclear. If you're taking notes, just write down, "Let the clear interpret the unclear." It's so very important.

Maybe you're preaching from Corinthians where it talks about baptism for the dead and you're thinking, Am I supposed to believe that we baptize for the dead. The Bible clearly teaches that a person must repent or believe in Christ to be born again, put their faith in Christ, and that we're saved by grace through faith, it's not of ourselves, it's a gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast, then why would we assume that we have to be baptized in order to be saved?

(Question asked) Well, I just gave that one, and I don't know the reference but where it talks about being baptized for the dead. Does anybody know the reference? First Corinthians 15, and then the clarity of all kinds of Scriptures that we're saved by grace through faith, Ephesians 2:8-9, and it's pretty clear then that we're not going to have to be baptized or we should be baptizing for the dead. That's my illustration.

Here's the third, this is a favorite of mine, interpret personal experience in the light of Scripture and not Scripture in light of personal experience. Like Terry had mentioned earlier yesterday about the book of Acts on the day of Pentecost, the cloven tongues of fire, and the rushing

mighty wind, and we need to determine what is clearly taught in the Bible as experiential and what is backed up by the Word of God and not what we just think we experience. We base how we interpret Scripture on our knowledge of God's Word not our experience.

It's kind of silly but the laughing in the Spirit movement that went on years ago, "slain in the Spirit," and I've talked to people round and round about it, "Is it biblical? Is it scriptural? Is there any scriptural basis for 'slain in the Spirit?'" Chuck Smith used to say, "The only place I read about it, ' . . . the slain of the LORD shall be many,' the Lord slew them, but they never got back up." Or, when Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane and He said, "Who are you looking for?" They said, "Jesus." He said, "I Am," and they all fell backwards. So, when we get together in church we ought to fall all over and roll around, and they use that as a basis for interpreting Scripture, but it's not a smart thing to do. Or people formulate their doctrine based on their experience, "I know it's true. I felt it. I saw it. I heard it. I experienced it." But the clear teaching of Scripture is contrary to that, so you want to camp on Scripture not camp on your personal experience. It's so very important.

Here's a fourth, biblical examples are authoritative only when supported by a command. There are things in the Bible that people did that we're not supposed to do, and it's a crazy illustration, but David committed adultery, right? King David, author of the psalms committed adultery. It's okay. No, it's not, clearly. We don't have a command to commit adultery. It's so very important. Take Jesus as an example, He got up early and prayed, so everyone must get up early and pray. That's not a command. We're not commanded. It might be suggested or encouraged to seek the Lord. Jesus wore a robe, we should wear a robe. Jesus wore sandals, we should wear sandals. Jesus walked, we should walk. We shouldn't drive a car. I mean, where are you going to go with it? So, you've got to be careful with that biblical example and make sure that there has to be a command to follow that to make sure you preach it that way. Sometimes pastors are commanding people to do something, but it's not commanded by God in His Word.

As a footnote under this, a biblical example can verify what you think the Lord is leading you to do, but it's not necessarily mandatory or required or a command for others. Jesus did get up early and prayed, so it's fine to do that, that's great, but it's not something that we have to command other people to do.

Fifthly, correct interpretation is essential before you can make correct application. I think I've probably said that several times already. You want to know: What does it say? What does it mean? How does it apply. It's so very important. Recently I was asked about Acts 16:31 where I think it's Paul and Silas in Philippi and the Philippian Jailer gets saved. The Philippian jailer says, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved? 31 Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house." They wanted to know, "Does that mean if I get saved, my family is going to be saved?" The answer is no, that's not what that means, so we have to have correct interpretation before we can make proper application.

Here's the sixth, a doctrine cannot be considered biblical unless it sums up and includes all that the Bible says about it. It's so very important. You need to actually have the overall arching

teaching of the Bible supporting that doctrine to build a doctrine upon that. Be careful that you don't take things that are in historical records of Acts and the gospels that are descriptive and make them prescriptive, applying them to people, then it's not accurate, so the difference between prescriptive and descriptive found in historical narrative.

Here's the seventh, interpret a passage in light of its context. Again, that's a very well-known, very basic, very fundamental point on hermeneutics. Interpret a passage in light of its historical context. Again, we've been recommending books to read for that, and I really enjoy using for that Robert G. Gromacki's, *New Testament Survey*. I also like to read, *Talk Thru The Bible*, by Kenneth Boa and Bruce Wilkinson to give you that background and a context. It's so very important—interpret a passage in light of its context. You always, when you're teaching a passage, you want to study the introduction to the book it's in, this historical setting—who wrote to whom, why, what the purpose of the epistle is, what kind of material you're in. The danger of preaching a single verse is often that it has been taken out of context.

I hear a lot of times when guys jump from verse to verse, they're not using a text, and to support the text, quote a cross-reference...and by the way, when you have a text that you're preaching from, and tomorrow I'm going to start talking about developing the sermon and on Friday as well, but when you have a text and you're preaching a text, and you quote a cross-reference to support that text, you shouldn't begin to preach your cross-reference, that's not your text, you should just quote it to support your text. If you quote a text to support your text, make sure the text you are quoting does support the text, that it's not taken out of context. So, you quote this verse over here to support this verse that you're teaching, but the verse that you quoted over here has nothing to do with the verse that you're preaching from. You have to look up your cross-references in their context and understand them to quote them and support your text that you're preaching from. It's very important. So, a text without a context becomes a pretext. It's so very, very important.

We'd be here all day, if we went into all the examples. A classic one is Matthew 16:28 at the end of the chapter where Jesus said, "There be some standing here, which shall not taste of death, till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom." The Scripture says in Matthew 17, that six days later Jesus took Peter, James, and John and went to a high mountain and He was transfigured before them. Some people stop at the end of Matthew 16, "... you ... shall not taste of death, till they see the ... kingdom," and they say, "They're all dead, so the kingdom must've already come," so they come up with preterism, "The kingdom has already come. It's all past," and they don't read the next section of Scripture. So many times when you're starting a new chapter in a book of the Bible, you back up, right? You back up into the chapter preceding it, you read beyond it. It's so important that you get the context of the book you're in—where in the book, the chapter you're in, the verses, and the ones that are behind it and the ones that go beyond it—always setting the context and keeping that clear.

Here's the eighth, Scripture has only one meaning and should be taken literally. It's so very, very important. Don't spiritualize, don't allegorize unless it's clear that the Scripture uses allegory or a metaphor or a simile. It's a challenge to try to determine, but the basic

fundamental principle in all interpretation is that you have a literal approach. Now, interpreting the Bible literally doesn't mean that you don't acknowledge the fact that the Bible uses types and analogies and metaphors and similes, but every figure of speech known to man, and I brought the books here. I'll talk about them. A good book on hermeneutics will explain all the different figures of speech that are found in the Bible. That's one of the big, big, big issues or hurdles—figures of speech were used in the Bible—and you have to understand that to bridge that cultural gap. It's so very important, so make sure that you take it literally unless there is good warrant to do that.

When you're preaching a historical narrative passage, don't spiritualize or allegorize the text or read into the text spiritual typology that wasn't intended to be in the text. That's one of the big problems when we start seeing types where they're not really types and God never intended there to be types.

(Question) Well, a simple one would be, Terry and I were just mentioning the life of Joseph. If you take the life of Joseph, you see a lot of parallels. In answering your question, I'm getting a bit ahead of myself, and people say, "Well, Joseph was a type of Christ," and then they spiritualize the life of Joseph who didn't exist, but the New Testament does not designate Joseph as a type. There's parallels, and there's things you can see that are like Christ, and you might make mention of that, but it's not classified as a type, and I'll talk about that more in a minute. When is a type a type? One of the best answers to that, there are several, but one of them is when the Bible itself says it's a type you're on good ground. If not, then you're the authority reading into the text what is not really there. Again, allegorizing, spiritualizing things in the Bible that weren't intended to be a type. That's a whole class just on interpreting typology. It's a whole class on interpreting parables, interpreting parables, typology...

(Question) Yes, right. So, there's times when the Scripture might speak of something that's going to be fulfilled immediately, but we know that because the New Testament substantiates it.

Scripture has only one meaning. It should always be taken literal, and watch out for figures of speech, parables, similes, metaphors, symbolisms. The book of Revelation, who hasn't struggled preaching through the book of Revelation? What a challenge that is. It's like the "Grand Central Station" of Scripture. Everything comes together in that book of Revelation, and it is such an interpretive challenge. But watch out for types. When is a type a type? Again, it's the New Testament designated.

Let me mention the books. This book that I the other day mentioned, I'll mention it again, is probably the one I most recommend on hermeneutics, that is, Basic Bible Interpretation by Roy B. Zuck. This is a great book. It's got a whole chapter on "Testing the Types and Sensing the Symbols." It's got a whole chapter on when is a type a type, and I think every pastor should read this book.

This is a little more general. This is the inductive Bible study method, Studying, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible, by Walter Henrichsen and Gayle Jackson. This is a great book. I've

used this probably most for teaching the subject on a lay level that is so important.

I've found and I actually taught hermeneutics about three different semesters at the Calvary Chapel Bible College in Twin Peaks. I don't think I taught it down here when they moved to Murrieta, but that was the subject that challenged me, stretched me more than anything I've ever taught, more than teaching theology. Systematic theology, yeah, let's do that, that's great; but teaching hermeneutics? I'm getting the questions that you get, "When is a type a type," and "What about this and that?" and questioning preachers that take Old Testament stories and allegorize or spiritualize them and they don't even see the historical truth of them, it becomes very dangerous.

So, Scripture has only one meaning and should be taken literally. If you're not taking a passage literally, ask yourself, "Is it because I don't want to obey it or is it because it doesn't fit my preconceived theological bias?" Maybe you're not interpreting a verse literally because it lends counter to your presupposition and your pretheological bias.

Here's the ninth, when two doctrines are clearly taught in the Bible yet appear to be contradictory, accept both as scriptural in the confident belief that they resolve themselves into a higher unity. I don't know if that was under 18 words or not. It might've been over 18 words and I had my hands in my pocket when I said that. Let me re-read that: When two doctrines are clearly taught in the Bible and appear to be contradictory, accept both as scriptural in the confident belief that they resolve themselves in a higher unity.

So, I do have some examples about this—the Trinity. Did someone say the other day about preaching on the Trinity? Preach a sermon on the Trinity, that'll stretch you. That'll challenge you. People appreciate it because the average person in the pew doesn't get the benefit of a Bible college or a seminary education, and for them to have their pastor actually teach on the Trinity is very good. I don't try to explain the Trinity anymore, other than explaining there's one God, three Persons, coequal, coeternal; one God, three Persons. If you try to do the water and the vapor, the ice and the melting, and the egg and the yolk and all that stuff, you just get lost. How do you reconcile one God in three Persons? I don't, but I teach that I believe it, that God knows and God reconciles. The dual nature of Christ, one Person, two natures; truly God, truly Man. How do you explain that? You don't, but you just accept them both as being true.

Then, we could spend quite a bit of time talking about sovereign election of God and the responsibility and freewill of man. I don't know if you even want to go there right now, but how do you reconcile that? You don't. Spurgeon said, "I don't reconcile friends," but they do reconcile in a higher unity. I don't know, but I don't think I should weaken or diminish preaching that God sovereignly, by His grace, elects us or chooses us to salvation. The minute you say that, "Oh, you're a flaming Calvinist," and people freak out. Then, you have Arminianists over here that are so focused on freewill that he denies the sovereign elective grace of God, so why not just teach both? "Well, you know, you can't have both." They're both taught in Scriptures, and you don't try to reconcile them, you just preach them faithfully and let God take care of that. Let God sort that out.

Here's the tenth, the primary purpose of Bible study is to change our lives, not increase our knowledge. It's to change our lives not to increase our knowledge. That's what we need to keep our focus on, that we're not just trying to dispense information, we want people to encounter God, to come to love God, to know God, and to be changed into the image of Christ, to bring them, " . . . unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ." Again, that's just a very, very simple sampling of some hermeneutical principles. I do urge you, if you are teaching the Bible, to at least get a simple basic book on hermeneutical principles and study that—what are types, symbols, figures of speech, all that stuff. It's one of the most challenging categories of study of theology that I've ever encountered, but it will also help you to preach the Word, help you to be a better preacher of the Word, and to be able to, as Paul said to Timothy, " . . . rightly dividing the word of truth." If you want to cut it straight, then you better know how to interpret Scripture.

Someone said, "To give the Bible its rightful place is to bring health to the church, light to the world, and glory to God." Amen? Let's pray.