

Living Way Church
Biblical Studies Program – March 2013
Knowing Scripture: The Art and Science of Biblical Interpretation
Lesson Three

- I. Review
 - A. Our view of the nature and origin of the Bible (as divinely inspired) will have a significant effect on how we interpret the Bible
 - B. The three primary principles of interpretation (that Sproul highlights)
 1. The **analogy of faith** is the rule that Scripture is to interpret Scripture
 - a. This principle rests on the conviction (and confidence) that the Bible is the inspired Word of God and is therefore consistent and coherent
 - b. This means that no part of Scripture can be interpreted in such a way as to render it in conflict with what is clearly taught elsewhere in Scripture
 - c. The analogy of faith keeps the whole Bible in view, lest we suffer from the effects of exaggerating one part of Scripture to the exclusion of others
 2. The Bible should be interpreted according to **its literal sense**
 - a. This was one of the most significant advances in biblical scholarship during the Reformation
 - (1) The term literal comes from the Latin *litera* meaning “letter”
 - (2) To interpret something literally is to pay attention to the letters and words being used
 - b. To interpret the Bible literally is to interpret it as literature – the meaning of the passage is to be interpreted according to the normal rules of grammar, speech, syntax, and context
 - c. The Medieval church developed a fourfold approach to interpreting the Bible
 - (1) The literal, showing what God did
 - (2) The moral, revealing what believers should do
 - (3) The allegorical, showing what at surface level God hid
 - (4) The mystical, or anagogical, showing the heavenly understanding
 - d. In effect, the method obscured the true meaning of the Bible by imposing arbitrary meanings on it
 - e. The Reformers rejected multiple meanings to biblical passages
 - (1) In doing this, they did not restrict the application of

- Scripture to a single sentence
- (2) Although a Scripture passage has one meaning (the author's intended meaning), it may have a number of applications
- (3) Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics: *"We affirm that the meaning expressed in each biblical text is single, definite and fixed. We deny that the recognition of this single meaning eliminates the variety of its application."*
 - f. The literal sense keeps us from letting our imaginations run away with wild interpretations and invites us to examine closely the literary forms of Scripture
- 3. The **grammatical-historical method** focuses attention not only on literary forms but on grammatical constructions and the historical context out of which the Scriptures were written
 - a. The literary context includes the words, sentences, and paragraphs preceding and following a passage – the literary context locates a passage within the larger purposes of a book
 - b. The historical context includes knowledge of the history, culture, economy, social structure, geography, climate, agriculture, architecture, family life, and morals of the biblical characters, authors, and initial readers
 - c. "Sound interpretation demands a careful analysis of the grammar and historical context of a writing."
 - d. The grammatical historical method focuses our attention on the original meaning of the text, keeping us from reading into Scripture our own ideas drawn from the present

II. Sproul's Practical Rules for Biblical Interpretation

- A. Review from last week:
 - 1. Rule one: read the Bible like any other book
 - 2. Rule two: read the Bible with passion ("read...existentially")
 - 3. Rule three: interpret the historical narratives by the didactic
 - 4. Rule four: interpret the implicit by the explicit
- B. Continuing with Sproul's list of practical rules...
- C. Rule 5: Determine carefully the meaning of words
 - 1. The Bible is a book which communicates information verbally – this means the Bible is filled with words
 - a. Thoughts are expressed through the relationship of those words
 - b. Each individual word contributes something to the whole of the content expressed

2. The better we understand the individual words used in biblical statements, the better we will be able to understand the total message of Scripture
 3. Sproul states that probably the greatest advance in biblical scholarship in the 20th century was in the area of lexicography – the meaning of words
 - a. Gerhard Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*
 - (1) It is composed of a series of careful studies of the meanings of key words found in the New Testament
 - (2) The word is subjected to an exhaustive analysis in every known text it appears in – traced from the period of Homer and classical Greece, corresponding usage in the Old Testament Greek translation, its use in the Gospels, in the epistles, and in early church history
 - b. This greatly sharpens our understanding of biblical language and also facilitates the accuracy of modern translations of the Bible
 4. Etymology (the science of word derivations) and customary usage is important to know, as well
 5. Realize that certain words with multiple meanings in Scripture (e.g. "will" and "justify")
 6. There are words whose meanings have become doctrinal concepts, so context is important (e.g., "salvation" and "sanctify")
- D. Rule 6: Note the presence of parallelisms
1. Parallelism is a characteristic of Hebrew literature
 2. Parallelism may be defined as a relationship between two or more sentences or clauses that correspond in similarity or are set with each other
 3. Three basic types of parallelism:
 - a. Synonymous parallelism occurs when different lines or parts of the passage present the same thought in a slightly altered manner of expression
 - (1) Prov 19:5
 - (2) Ps 95:6
 - b. Antithetic parallelism occurs when the two parts are said in contrast to each other
 - (1) Prov 13:1
 - (2) Prov 10:4
 - c. Synthetic parallelism is a bit more complex, the first part of a passage creates an expectation that is completed by the second part

- (1) Ps 92:9
 - (2) Num 6:24-26
- E. Rule 7: Note the difference between proverb and law
1. Proverbs are catchy little couplets designed to express practical truisms
 - a. They reflect principles of wisdom for godly living
 - b. They do not reflect moral laws that are to be applied absolutely to every conceivable life situation
 2. We must also distinguish between different forms of laws; the two basic types or forms of law found in the Bible are...
 - a. Apodictic law – laws which express absolutes and follows a direct personal form such as, “you shall” or “you shall not” (e.g., the Ten Commandments, etc)
 - b. Casuistic law – “if...then...”
 - (1) Case law (e.g., Ex 23:4)
 - (2) Casuistic law gives the principle by example, but the principal has an obviously wider realm of application
- F. Rule 8: Observe the difference between the spirit and the letter of the law
1. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus made it clear that the law has a wider application than its letter
 2. Jesus goes beyond the letter to a concern for the spirit
 - a. He does not set the spirit against the letter or substitute the spirit for the letter...
 - b. But adds the spirit to the letter
 - (1) Mt 5:20
 - (2) Mt 23:23 (Lk 11:42)
- G. Rule 9: Be careful with parables
1. Mark 4:10-12
 - a. If Jesus is to be taken seriously about the use of parables, we must acknowledge an element of concealment in them
 - b. That is not to say that the only purpose of the parable is to obscure or conceal the mystery of the kingdom to the impenitent
 2. The parable is not a riddle; it is meant to be understood, at least by those who were open to it
 3. Another problem in interpreting parables rests with the question of the relationship of parable to allegory
 - a. When Jesus does interpret the parable of the sower, He does so in allegorical fashion
 - b. However, we may not assume that we are free to create allegorical meanings in all parables, with each detail having a specific spiritual meaning

4. The safest way to treat the parables is to look for one basic central point
 - a. As a “rule of thumb,” avoid all allegorizing of the parables except where the New Testament clearly indicates an allegorical meaning
 - b. But even the rule of “one central meaning” cannot be rigidly applied
- H. Rule 10: Be careful with predictive prophecy
1. Interpretations range from the skeptical, naturalistic method, which virtually eliminates predictive prophecy; to the wild, bizarre method that sees in every contemporary event a “clear” fulfillment of a biblical prophecy
 2. Some conservative thinkers insist that every detail of biblical prophecy must be fulfilled to the letter, leaving no room for symbolic predictions or predictions that have a broader scope of meaning
 3. In examining how the New Testament treats Old Testament prophecy, we discover that in some cases an appeal was made to fulfillment of the letter (e.g., the birth of the Messiah in Bethlehem) and in others, the fulfillment has a broader scope (such as the fulfillment of Malachi's prophecy of the return of Elijah)
 4. Regarding Elijah and John the Baptist
 - a. Scriptures
 - (1) Mal 4:5-6
 - (2) John 1:19-28
 - (3) Mark 9:12-13
 - (4) Matt 11:13-15
 - (5) Lk 1:17
 - b. John was not actually the reincarnation or reappearance of Elijah himself; but in a certain sense he was Elijah – he came in the spirit and power of Elijah
 5. Dispensationalism is a system of biblical interpretation formalized in the 19th century by John Nelson Darby and later popularized by the publishing of the Scofield Reference Bible and the establishment of Dallas Theological Seminary
 - a. Primary tenets of the system:
 - (1) A clear distinction between Israel and the Church
 - (2) A literal interpretation of Scripture
 - b. Rejecting of “spiritualizing” any text
 6. The Old Testament is reinterpreted in the light of Christ
 - a. Matt 2:15 quotes Hosea 11:1 -this principle runs throughout biblical prophecy

- b. Isaiah 53 becomes a prophecy of the Messiah only when it is interpreted in light of Jesus Christ
 - c. Only in the light of the New Testament do Old Testament prophecies find their deeper meaning
 - 7. Of all forms of prophecy, the apocalyptic form is the most difficult to handle
 - a. Apocalyptic literature is characterized by a high degree of symbolic imagery that is sometimes interpreted for us and sometimes left un-interpreted
 - b. With apocalyptic literature, one important key is to interpret these images using the general meaning of such images in the Bible itself
 - I. Rule 11: Interpret the Bible with a spirit of humility
 - 1. While we believe our interpretation of Scripture and our opinions are correct, we must humbly acknowledge the possibility that at some points we could be mistaken
 - 2. Knowing Scripture is a lifelong project which requires diligence and perseverance
 - 3. We are not to be constantly in doubt regarding our interpretation of Scripture; however, if we encounter new information that possibly re-frames our understanding of a passage of Scripture, we must not dismissive without first carefully examining all the pertinent facts
 - 4. "If my views cannot stand the test of objective analysis and verification, humility demands that I abandon them."
 - J. These practical rules for interpretation do not cover every technical problem that we encounter in Scripture, but they do serve as basic guidelines