

### You Asked! Lesson 3

Question: How do you tell the difference between a prescriptive and a descriptive passage?

Answer: This is a question that I wish more people would ask! It is far more important than many realize both for our own understanding and our evangelistic efforts. Many of the issues that plague us in our dialogues with lost people are rooted in a misunderstanding of what the Bible actually prescribes vs. what it merely describes.

#### 1. Definitions

- a. I hope you will see a pattern unfold in our lessons together! Definitions are exceedingly important to properly understand and answer questions.
- b. Without definitions, it is impossible to arrive at biblical answers
- c. Here are the two terms in question today:
  - i. “prescriptive texts” are passages of Scripture that prescribe (or commend/command) some kind of action or belief
    1. Prescriptive texts are those texts which are given to us for our emulation and obedience
  - ii. “descriptive texts” are passages of Scripture that merely describe an action or belief. They do not commend those actions to us, instead these texts simply tell us that these thoughts, actions or ideas are present

#### 2. The Importance of Telling the Difference

- a. What can go wrong if we mistake a descriptive text for a prescriptive text?
- b. The answer is that we can paint a false picture of who God is or what God would demand of us. Additionally, we can conclude that the Bible is contradictory if we mistake prescriptive for descriptive texts
- c. The Bible is full of narratives and descriptions of individuals, movements and ideas.
  - i. Many of those descriptions include components that are expressly evil and, therefore, lead to ruin
  - ii. Sometimes, the Bible is simply telling us what happened, not what should happen!
  - iii. For instance:
    1. Noah got drunk, David committed adultery and murder, Solomon married numerous women, Peter denied Christ, Paul persecuted the church and Thomas doubted the resurrection
    2. All of these things did in fact happen, and God has good reason for us to know and understand that they took place, but they are not written to us by God in order to prescribe a behavior on our part!
      - a. God is not commending plural marriage to us, God is simply telling us that some of the biblical figures were married to more than one woman
      - b. When we interpret descriptive texts as if they are prescribing the same action or belief, we are setting ourselves up for failure and we are destined to end in a contradictory state

3. How do we tell the difference?

a. There are three things that we are looking for as we discern the difference between a prescriptive and descriptive text:

i. First, is the action described condemned in other places in the Scripture?

1. So, Noah's drunkenness is an example of Noah as a sinful man. How do we know that his example is one of warning and not commendation? Because the Bible expressly condemns the action elsewhere (Romans 13:13, Galatians 5:21, Ephesians 5:18).
2. These are all universal statements, which means that Noah was either in the wrong or God's commands change. We know that God cannot change (Malachi 3:6) so we must conclude that Noah was in the wrong and that his action was therefore described to us, not prescribed

ii. Second, does the Bible commend the action to us as believers?

1. When reading a historic narrative, we must recognize that we are reading the account of fallible men (with the notable exception of Christ)
2. This means that their actions are not always in line with what God requires
3. How do we know what God requires? He has told us in express commandments!
4. So, if we read of an action or a description of a belief that is commended to us through express commandments, we can know that God is prescribing that action or belief to us?

iii. Third, how does the Bible frame the text?

1. Many point to plural marriage as commended by the Scripture. David had multiple wives, so did Solomon and Jacob! How could we say that this practice is wrong in light of its prevalence in the text?
2. First, we must note that God describes marriage, positively, as a relationship between one man and one woman
  - a. Jesus only has one bride and marriage is meant to picture the relationship Christ has with His church, therefore marriage is understood in terms of an exclusive relationship between a bride and groom (see Ephesians 5)
3. Second, we can see that each situation of plural marriage results in chaos and suffering
  - a. Jacob loved one wife over the other, Solomon was led astray by his taste for women, David's family fell apart at the end of his life and so on
  - b. In each situation, the Bible shows us that these family dynamics are not healthy and, therefore, we shouldn't

conclude that God is commending plural marriage to us, instead we should see that these decisions were made in opposition to God's design and, therefore, are given to us merely as descriptive examples of what not to do and not as prescriptive commands to emulate

4. What does it matter?

- a. The answer is that our goal in Bible study and our goal in evangelism should be faithfulness to the Lord
- b. If we think that God is prescribing a sinful activity to us, we will live in opposition to His will and suffer the broken consequences that will surely follow.
- c. Furthermore, if we do not understand the difference, we run the risk of projecting to the world a contradictory worldview that is easily refuted and masks the truth of the Scriptures