

INTRODUCTION To read the Bible is no trivial matter. Although we are to take it in like daily bread (Matthew 4:4), we dare not approach it in an unworthy manner. Bernard Ramm (*Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 2) expresses what is at stake in interpretation of the Bible when he writes,

To determine what God has said is a high and holy task. With fear and trembling each should be ever so careful of that which he has adopted as his method of Biblical interpretation. Upon the correct interpretation of the Bible rests our doctrine of salvation, of sanctification, of eschatology, and of Christian living. It is our solemn responsibility to know what God has said with reference to each of these. This can be done only if we have carefully, thoroughly, and systematically formulated that system of Biblical interpretation which will yield most readily the native meaning of the Bible. . . .

Further, we need to know the correct method of Biblical interpretation so that we do not confuse the voice of God with the voice of man. In every one of those places where our interpretation is at fault, we have made substitution of the voice of man for the voice of God.

Sacred Scripture requires not just any kind of reading because it is not just any kind of book. Our study of Scripture must abide by principles—what we call “**hermeneutics**”—that continually remind us of what God’s Word is, and that continually guide us to read His Word in accord with what God has intended it for in our lives. Without the appropriate vigilance, our reading of Scripture easily deteriorates. And when it does, we easily begin to confuse “the voice of God with the voice of man.” The consequences of poor reading are staggering. Most of all, it dishonors the God of the Word.

But why do Christians need principles of interpretation? Don’t regenerate believers automatically read the Bible correctly? Not exactly. As the believers in Corinth illustrate (see 1 and 2 Corinthians), genuinely saved people can and do misunderstand the Word of God—sometimes quite egregiously. Although God through regeneration transforms us from natural men to spiritual men (see 1 Corinthians 2:14–15) and opens our eyes to receive His truth (2 Corinthians 3:12–18), He does not change our status as creatures, suspend the processes by which we learn, nor instantaneously eradicate every ignorance or error in our thinking. We still must read, study, and learn.

Simply by virtue of our status as *creatures* (even as new creations in Christ, 2 Corinthians 5:17), we are and always will be dependent upon *mediums of communication* (written text, signs, voices) to convey information. Accordingly, as creatures we also must employ *principles of interpretation* to discover the meaning of the communications we receive. The term “**hermeneutics**” refers specifically to these principles of interpretation. Whether we recognize it or not, in response to every communication we see, read, or hear, we immediately employ hermeneutics to make sense of what we have received. (It is important to note that God alone does not need hermeneutics. God always knows everything absolutely; He never learns anything. This is why Jesus instructed us not to think that our prayers actually inform God of anything. Why? “For your Father knows what you need before you ask Him”—Matthew 6:8; see also Psalm 139:2, 4, 23; Hebrews 4:13.)

The Bible is a medium of communication from God to us—one that contains various kinds or genres of written text (narrative, poetry, prophecy, letters, etc.). As such, students of the Bible must employ the appropriate hermeneutics to these written texts if they are to understand correctly the knowledge God has conveyed. As Ramm stated above, a lot is riding on the choice of appropriate hermeneutics. J. I. Packer also expresses the gravity of this issue when he writes, “Scripture can rule us only so far as it is understood, and it is understood only so far as it is properly interpreted. A misinterpreted Bible is a misunderstood Bible, which will lead us out of God’s way rather than in it. Interpretation must be right if biblical authority is to be real in our lives and in our churches” (“Give Me Understanding,” 104).

For those who sincerely desire biblical authority to be real in their lives, the following **six principles** are presented as essential for the study of God’s Word:

- I. Submit to Scripture’s authority and seek divine enablement.
- II. Suspend preunderstandings and search for the writer’s intent.
- III. Respect the context and read the language naturally.
- IV. Pursue a single meaning for each text.
- V. Read in the light of antecedent revelation.
- VI. Validate your exegetical results by external sources.

The first four of these principles will be covered below (Lesson 11), and the final two will be covered in the next lesson (Lesson 12).

I. SUBMIT & SEEK

I. Submit to Scripture’s authority and seek divine enablement.

Attitude affects interpretation. The effectiveness of your study of the Bible will depend upon whether you approach it in a manner consistent with its nature. As the Apostle Paul made clear, “All Scripture is inspired by God” (2 Timothy 3:16). As breathed out by God, the biblical text demands to be read with an approach that from the very outset is *humble, contrite, and reverent* (Isaiah 66:2)—not critical, dismissive, or skeptical. The biblical text must be received “not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe” (1 Thessalonians 2:13).

**The Hermeneutic of
Personal Submission**

This humble submission influences the entire process of Bible study. As John Owen stated, “Everyone who devotes himself to the study of holy literature should keep it firmly before his mind, in all of his reading and meditation, that the all-holy God is, in a special manner, close to him as he works.” This approach necessarily promotes *prayer*—specifically, the constant request that God would enable the study of His Word through the influence of the Holy Spirit. As noted in the previous session (Lesson 10: “The Prerequisites of Bible Study”), the Holy Spirit’s ministry of “**illumination**” is the special work of the Spirit to produce within the believer a growing *understanding of, certainty of, hunger for, and obedience to* the meaning of the biblical text. Dependency upon this special work of the Spirit is foundational for accurate interpretation.

- Psalm 119:18 – “Open my eyes, that I may behold wonderful things from Your law.”
- Psalm 119:125 – “I am Your servant; give me understanding, that I may know Your testimonies.”

II. LISTEN TO THE AUTHOR’S VOICE, NOT YOUR OWN

II. Suspend preunderstandings and search for the writer’s intent.

“**Preunderstandings**” are already-formed conclusions about what the biblical text means. We all have them, and they can be correct, partially correct, or downright wrong. At the same time, it is impossible to become a *tabula rasa* (“clean slate”)—to pretend as if you’ve never learned anything at all in your life whenever you come to the biblical text.

As such, there is the ever-present danger of what is called “**confirmation bias**”—“the tendency to test one’s beliefs or conjectures by seeking evidence that might confirm or verify them and to ignore evidence that might disconfirm or refute them” (*Oxford Dictionary of Psychology*, 158). Another serious obstacle is known as the “**illusion of mastery**”—the assumption that “I already know that!” This illusion often prevents readers of Scripture from seeing beyond their preunderstandings to what the author of the text is actually saying. They simply assume they have already learned all there is to know. Whenever such illusions and biases are not recognized and kept in check, readers easily “confuse the voice of God with the voice of man.”

As such, one of the crucial principles of Bible study is the ability to recognize preunderstandings and guard against bias. Dedicated effort is required to silence your own voice—your own insistence of what the text *must* be saying based on your own impressions, feelings, traditions, or intellectual prowess. Ultimately, this principle requires a steadfast commitment to listen to the only voice that matters—the voice of the biblical author as he speaks on behalf of God.

Stated simply, this essential principle of interpretation is known as the principle of “**authorial intent**.” It expresses the *golden rule of interpretation*: “Do unto *authors* as you would have them do unto you.” It also expresses the stated expectation of the biblical writers themselves. For example:

**The Hermeneutic of
Authorial Intent**

- John 3:34 – “For He whom God has sent speaks the words of God; for He gives the Spirit without measure.”
- 1 Corinthians 14:37 – “If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord’s commandment.”
- Ephesians 3:4 – “By referring to this [what Paul just stated in Eph 2:11–22], when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ.”
- 2 Timothy 2:7 – “Consider what I say [i.e., what I write], for the Lord will give you understanding in everything.”

III. RESPECT THE
CONTEXT & THE
LANGUAGE

III. Respect the context and read the language naturally.

The word “**context**” refers to the *world* into which a text is *woven*. This world is two-dimensional: (a) it is the world of *history*; and (b) it is the world of *literature*—specifically, the literature surrounding the text being studied.

Sound interpretation of the Bible requires a heightened sensitivity to these two dimensions of context. God did not reveal His Word in a vacuum or send it by parachute down from heaven. Instead, He revealed it on earth, through acts of history, in the language of historical prophets and apostles, to meet the spiritual needs of real human audiences. As such, a high sensitivity to the historical context of each text is essential. Though transcendentally authoritative across all cultures and times, a biblical text is never *disconnected* from the historical world in which it was given.

Moreover, God did not reveal His Word in a heavenly or angelic language—a language that used a totally alien form of logic and required human readers to ascend into heaven to try to decipher it. Instead, God brought His Word into being using already existing languages—the language of Hebrew and Aramaic in the Old Testament, and the language of Koine (Common) Greek in the New Testament. As such, students of Scripture must endeavor to understand the language of the text according to the way in which that language was used at the time when the text was written. Moreover, students of Scripture must also pay careful attention to the broader literary context of words, sentences, paragraphs, and sections of books. God’s Word is not a random collection of spiritual truths. It is written as literature and so must be interpreted as literature as well.

Stated simply, this essential principle of interpretation is known as the principle of “**literal interpretation**.” The way in which we can understand the intent of the Spirit-superintended biblical writer is to treat his language *normally*, according to the laws of the language used at the time of its writing. This is another way of saying that we must treat the language *literally*. Martin Luther stated this principle well: “**We must everywhere stick to the simple, pure, and natural sense of the words that accords with the rules of grammar and the normal use of language as God has created it in man.**”

**The Hermeneutic of
Literal Interpretation**

It is not the right of the reader to determine for himself whether a text is literal or figurative, narrative or poetry, parable or law. The author himself—under the special influence of the Holy Spirit—has determined this for the reader. It is the responsibility of the reader to acknowledge this.

At the same time, employing the principle of literal interpretation does not mean rejecting the possibility of figures of speech or metaphors in Scripture. Instead, it simply means that the text must be read in such a way that the author is the one to determine this question. Article XV of “The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics” explains this well: “We affirm the necessity of interpreting the Bible according to its literal or normal sense. The literal sense is the grammatical-historical sense—that is, the meaning which the writer expressed. Interpretation according to the literal sense will take account of all figures of speech and literary forms found in the text.”

IV. LOOK FOR
JUST ONE
MEANING

IV. Pursue a single meaning for each text.

Today's **postmodernists** insist that every interpreter *creates* his own meaning. For them, there are as many "meanings" as there are interpreters. For example, David Clines writes,

Today, since I think that we have moved into a post-modern age, I would be much more careful in speaking of meaning. . . . Nowadays I tend rather to believe that texts do not have meaning in themselves, and that what we call meaning is something that comes into being at the meeting point of text and reader. If that is so, then meaning is reader-dependent and reader-specific, and there are in principle as many meanings as there are readers" (*The Theme of the Pentateuch*, 2nd ed., 131).

This kind of thinking exists not only in academia but also in many home Bible studies, manifest in the common question, "What does this text mean *to you*?"

The rejection of a single meaning for the biblical text was also popular in the medieval era of church history. Many theologians of this period argued that each biblical text contains at least *four* meanings—what they called "**the quadriga**": (1) the literal meaning; (2) the allegorical meaning; (3) the tropological or moral meaning; and (4) the anagogical or eschatological meaning.

The Reformation was crucial for overturing this approach to Scripture and returning to interpret the language of the Bible according to its original setting. They recognized that as soon as the literal meaning of the text was diminished, subjectivity in interpretation was inevitable. The Puritan theologian William Ames warned, "There is only one meaning for every place in Scripture. Otherwise, the meaning of Scripture would not only be unclear and uncertain, but there would be no meaning at all—for anything which does not mean one thing surely means nothing" (*The Marrow of Theology*, 188).

**The Hermeneutic
of Single Meaning**

Ultimately, to set aside the writer and the language of his text in search of meanings beyond the writer's language is to open the door to speculation, personal agendas, and all forms of subjectivity. Although *applications* of the text do vary, the text's *meaning* cannot. Therefore, it is crucial to remember always that **a text can never mean what it never meant.**

DISCUSSION
QUESTIONS

Discuss these questions in your small group:

1. Explain in your own words the essential principles of Bible study covered in this lesson.
2. Define the term "hermeneutics." Why do we need hermeneutics?
3. Review the statements on the first page by Bernard Ramm and J. I. Packer. What is at stake if we use the wrong hermeneutics?
4. What is "confirmation bias"? Explain why a commitment to *authorial intent* will help reveal our inadequate and fallible preunderstandings.
5. We often hear the question, "What does this text mean to you?" What is it about the wording of this question that is wrong?
6. What happens when we abandon the principle of single meaning?

FURTHER
STUDY

For further study this week:

1. Memorize Acts 17:11.
2. Commit to memory the four essential principles of Bible study discussed in this lesson.
3. Review session #2 of the series, entitled "The Bible Is Inspired," which is available here: [The Bible Is Inspired | Men of the Word | Grace Community Church](#). The session discusses important qualities of Scripture which have a direct impact on our method of interpretation.
4. Listen to the sermon by John MacArthur, entitled "How Should We Interpret the Bible?" (*Grace to You*), preached August 25, 2013, available here: [How Should We Interpret the Bible?](#)
5. Read this article by Brad Klassen, entitled "What Does This Verse Mean to You? (*The Master's Seminary Blog*)", accessible here: [What Does This Verse Mean to You? Finding Meaning in Scripture](#).

Audio, video, and handouts for this session: www.gracechurch.org/motw

Next meeting: March 19, "I Am the Resurrection and the Life" (Chris Hamilton)