

Lesson One: The Need to Interpret

I. The Reader as an Interpreter

- A. "The first reason one needs to learn *how* to interpret is that, whether one likes it or not, every reader is at the same time an interpreter" (Fee, p. 18).
 - 1. Whenever we read anything, including the Bible, we interpret the words in a way that fit with our understanding of those words.
 - 2. For example, when you read the word "house" you naturally interpret that word into something familiar to you as "house."
 - 3. Most people today reading the "church" and picturing "people sitting in a building with "pews" much like their own" (Fee, p. 19).
 - 4. These are examples of the natural process of interpretation that takes place, whether we acknowledge it or not.
- B. Not only do we have the tendency to read words according to our predefined understanding of those words, but many words have multiple meanings.
 - 1. For example, consider how you would determine the use of a word like...
 - a. "Run," with 179 different possible meanings.
 - b. "Take," with 127 different possible meanings.
 - c. "Break," with 123 different possible meanings.
 - 2. Such words are only understandable for meaningful information by having their specific use *interpreted*.

} Dictionary.com Handout

II. The Nature of Scripture

- A. God chose to communicate with man by means of the written word.
 - 1. The written word comes in many types of genre and has to be interpreted according to the nature of that specific genre.
 - 2. God used "almost every available kind of [written] communication: narrative history, genealogies, chronicles, laws of all kinds, poetry of all kinds, proverbs, prophetic oracles, riddles, drama, biographical sketches, parables, letters, sermons, and apocalypses" (Fee, p. 22).
 - 3. To correctly understand the Bible, we have to know the correct way to interpret these various genres of literature.
- B. The written word of God's communication to man was carried by real people in real time.
 - 1. The biblical writers were real people, writing about actual events taking place in their time.
 - 2. The Bible is composed of the writings of at least 40 different people that lived over a period of about 1600 years.
 - 3. To accurately understand what they wrote, the reader must have an understanding of the historical context of the writer – social context, political context, economical context, etc.
 - 4. To the best of our ability, we must put ourselves in the place of the original audience to understand the original intent of what was written.

III. The First Task: Exegesis

- A. What is "Exegesis"?

1. "Exegesis is the careful, systematic study of the Scripture to discover the original, intended meaning" (Fee, p. 23).
 2. "Exegesis (from *ex*, out, and *egeisthas*, to guide or lead), means to lead out. It is the application of the principles of hermeneutics in bringing out the meaning of any writing which might otherwise be difficult to understand" (Dungan).
 - a. "Hermeneutics" is simply a technical term for "how to study the Bible."
 - b. "Hermeneutics is the science of interpretation" (Dungan).
 - c. Terry Hightower gives the following definition of "Hermeneutics,"
 "Hermeneutics traditionally has been limited to Biblical interpretation in the sense of EXPLAINING the message to another (emphasizing words, sentences, paragraphs, immediate context, and remote context). But it also means TO SAY (Neh. 8:8; Heb. 5:11-14; etc.) and TO TRANSLATE (John 1:42; 9:7; Matt. 1:23; Mark 5:41; 1 Cor. 12:10; 14:26; etc.) in addition to EXPLAINING (Eccles. 8:1; John 1:38; etc.)" (*Rightly Dividing the Word: VOLUME I, Forward*).
 - d. "The aim of good interpretation is simple: to get at the 'plain meaning of the text.' And the most important ingredient one brings to this task is enlightened common sense. The test of good interpretation is that it makes good sense of the text" (Fee, p. 18).
- B. What is involved with good exegesis?
1. Pray that you will be true to God and His word.
 - a. Your attitude toward God and His word will have a lot to do with what you get out of your Bible study.
 - b. Do you believe the Bible is the Divinely Inspired Word of God?
 - c. Do you believe that you can understand God's word?
 - d. Do you have the desire to know God's word?
 - e. Do you have the desire to apply God's word?
 - f. Do you have the desire to teach God's word?
 2. Exegetical items to be checked (Utley, p. 51)
 - a. Identify immediate contextual unit (literary unit and paragraph).
 - b. Note structural elements:
 - 1) Parallel structures
 - 2) Quotes/Allusions
 - 3) Figures of speech
 - 4) Illustrations
 - 5) Poem/Hymn/Song
 - c. Note grammatical elements (syntax)
 - 1) Verbs or verbals (tense, voice, mood, number, gender)
 - 2) Special construction (conditional sentences, prohibitions)
 - 3) Word or clause order
 - d. Note key words
 - 1) Give full semantical field
 - 2) Which meaning(s) fit the context best
 - 3) Be careful of set theological definitions
 - e. Note significant Biblical parallels of words, topics or quotes

- 1) Same context
- 2) Same book
- 3) Same author
- 4) Same genre
- 5) Same period
- 6) Entire Bible

IV. The Second Task: Hermeneutics

- A. Although the word “hermeneutics” ordinarily covers the whole field of interpretation, including exegesis, it is also used in the narrower sense of seeking the contemporary relevance of ancient texts (Fee, p. 29).
- B. The same principle of Fee’s “narrower sense” of hermeneutics is included in what Osborne terms, “the hermeneutical spiral,” the title of his book.
 1. The “hermeneutical spiral” takes place not only at the level of original intended meaning, as our understanding spirals upward (via the interaction of inductive and deductive research) to the intended meaning of the passage, but also at the level of contextualization, as our application spirals upward (via the movement from biblical to systematic to homiletical theology) to a proper understanding of the significance of the passage for Christian life today (Osborne, p. 31).
 2. Osborne includes the “upward spiral” of hermeneutics as it spirals from the purely exegetical study up to the personal application of what we learn through exegesis.
 3. We do not study the Bible just for the sake of academic knowledge but for practical, life altering, knowledge.
 4. Our goal is to be move the original meaning of the text, ascertained through exegesis, closer and closer to a practical application in our lives.
- C. While the ultimate goal of our study is to make practical application in our lives, we cannot start with the “here and now.”
 1. The reason you must *not begin* with the here and now is that the only proper control for hermeneutics is to be found *in the original intent of the biblical text* (Fee, p. 29).
 2. That is, the only way we can know that we are applying the Scriptures correctly in our lives now is to know what it originally meant then.
 3. We cannot make applications of a passage that the Holy Spirit never intended when He originally gave the passage.

