

Fishing Tips Part V

1 Peter 2:2

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Introduction

This morning we will be continuing our present series on biblical interpretation, making this the fifth sermon in the series. I have titled this series, ‘Fishing Tips,’ in light of the ancient Chinese proverb; “Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.” It is my contention that the people of God ought to be taught basic, common-sense principles of how to read the Bible with accuracy so that they might learn to feed upon Christ through His word without having an infantile dependency upon others for doing so. The series has been titled ‘Fishing Tips’ because it is my attempt at providing you broad principles of biblical interpretation so that you might feast upon Christ through His word on your own; so that you may be able to feed yourself ‘for a lifetime.’

Thus far we have considered two foundational realities of interpretation: 1. we are all interpreters and 2. the Bible is interpretable, and four basic principles of interpretation: 1. practice, 2. get the big picture, and 3. interpret first: application flows out of interpretation, and 4. interpret first: discover the original intention of the author. Last week we began to discuss the fourth principle of interpretation; this week will look at it in further detail. Before getting there I first want to draw your attention to 1 Peter 2:2.

1 Peter 2:2

My only reason in bringing you to 1 Peter 2:2 is to provide further proof that a series on biblical interpretation is necessary for each and every Christian regardless of their role in the body of Christ or their gifting.

² *Like newborn infants, desire the unadulterated spiritual milk, so that you may grow by it in [your] salvation,* ³ *since you have tasted that the Lord is good.*

I want you to notice 4 things about this passage. *1. Consider what is commanded.* Here Peter is commanding his readers to *desire* the unadulterated spiritual milk. The word *desire* literally means ‘to crave’ or ‘to long for’. In other words, Peter is calling them to pursue the unadulterated milk of God’s word with tenacity. If you are not craving the milk of the word you are not obeying Peter’s command in this passage. *2. Consider what these Christians are to crave.* Peter commands them to crave the unadulterated spiritual milk. This is a reference to the word of God. As infants long for pure, non-watered down milk for growth and vitality, we are to crave the content of the word of God. But we are not to simply crave the word, but we are to crave the *unadulterated, non-watered down* word of God. Elsewhere (1 Corinthians 3 and Hebrews 5) milk is used in contrast to solid food, but here milk is not used in such a way. Rather, it is used here to refer to craving the transcendently deep, wide, and high truths of God’s word (summed up in the Gospel). In the same way that an infant craves sustenance for physical growth and development, Christians must crave sustenance for their spiritual growth and development. And the sustenance for spiritual growth and development is the spiritual milk of God’s word.

3. Notice the purpose for the command. Peter communicates that believers are in need of the unadulterated, non-watered down milk of God’s word for growth. You cannot grow apart

from craving a deeper understanding of the word of God. The word of God is essential to the growth of the people of God. If you are not growing in an ever increasing ability with the word of God you cannot be growing in your salvation. I point you to this passage to show you that craving the sustenance of the word, growing in an ability with the word of God, is essential to your growth in grace. The command is to crave, but the clear intent of Peter is to call his readers to feast upon Christ through his word. Craving leads to feasting.

4. *Notice why the Christian craves the spiritual milk of the word.* Peter, in 1 Peter 2:3, explains why the Christian craves the unadulterated spiritual milk of the word; “since *you have tasted that the Lord is good.*” The reason why the Christian craves the truth of the word of God is because he/she craves the glory of Christ; he/she has tasted that the Lord is good. When you taste something good, you want more of it—you crave it. The more you get of it the more you want of it. The word of God is where God has shown a light on His face. We pursue a knowledge of God’s word ultimately to know God intimately. Those of us who have tasted of the goodness of God, beholding His glory, the infinite majesty and wonder of his face and person, crave more of it. This craving drives us to the word that we might indulge ourselves upon Him more and more.

With this in mind, let me ask a question; what is at stake if we lose an emphasis on accurate biblical interpretation? A clear picture of the glory of Christ’s face! The battle for excellence in regard to accuracy with the word is a battle for a clear view (or revelation) of God Himself. I am passionate about Biblical interpretation ultimately because I have “tasted that the Lord is good.” I want an ever-clearer picture of Him because I have tasted of Him and as a result I crave more of Him. I don’t want a phony Jesus; I want the real Person. I don’t want a distorted or fuzzy picture of Him; I want a picture of Him in HD. Many Christians have a distorted and/or fuzzy view of the glory of Christ because they have a sloppy ability with the word of God. The battle for excellence in regard to biblical interpretation is ultimately not a battle for the intellect; it is a battle for the glory of God, and for our personal and communal enjoyment of Him. Many Christians are not passionate to know more of Him because the picture they have of Him is disfigured or fuzzy. The more clearly we see Him, the more we will give up for the sake of knowing Him and making Him known.

What will follow from this point throughout this sermon is an application of this passage. The fact is that the majority of Christians cannot satisfy a truth-based craving because they do not have a handle on God’s word—they lack understanding. The purpose of the rest of this sermon is to continue in the task of helping you gain some basic principles on how to satisfy yourself by feasting upon Christ through his word.

Recap

Principle #4: Interpret First: Discover the author’s original intention

Two weeks ago I asked the question, “What is the most immediate goal of Bible reading?” The answer was, “Interpretation!” Notice that I did not ask, “What is the most **ultimate** goal of Bible reading?” but rather, “What is the most *immediate* goal of Bible reading?” This is generally not the most common approach to the Scriptures. When most people approach the text they generally side step the very first task of bible reading, interpretation. And why do they do this? To get on to application. We believers in America have an obsession with immediate, on the spot application and relevance. This is why many American Christians say things like, “I don’t care what this means, I don’t care how to interpret this, I just want to know how it applies to my life. I don’t care about doctrine or theology, just give me Jesus.” But we have shown the fatal flaw in this approach to the Scriptures. After all, the point was that

application flows out of interpretation. You cannot apply something that you have not first interpreted.

With Matthew 5:27-30 in view, I asked why absolutely everyone in our congregation still has two eyes in light of the fact that Jesus told us that if our right eye caused us to sin to pluck it out. Haven't we all lusted with our eyes at least once in our lives? Of course we have. Why then do we still have both of our eyes in light of the command given by Jesus in Matthew 5:29? Because, you did not interpret Jesus' words in a straight-forward, literal fashion. Rather, you understood that Jesus was using hyperbole, speaking in extremes to communicate the drastic danger of sin and the length we must go to avoid its lure and destruction. The point being that your application of that passage flowed directly out of your interpretation of that passage. Because you did not interpret it literally, you did not apply it literally (and that is why everyone in here has two eyes even though we are all guilty of the sin of lust). I want to make this very clear; you must not simply believe that interpretation effects application; rather you must understand that interpretation completely determines application. When you bypass interpretation for the sake of immediate application, your application will be weak, watered-down, uninformed, and even unbiblical.

Last week we answered the question, "What is the most immediate goal of interpretation?" We know what the immediate goal of bible reading is interpretation, but now that we have established that fact, we must now ask ourselves what the immediate goal in the task of interpretation is. Once again, notice that the question is not, 'What is the most **ultimate** goal of biblical interpretation?' but 'What is the most **immediate** goal of interpretation?' In other words, when I approach a text from the word of God to interpret it, what is my first task? And the answer I gave to this question was, 'to discover the original intention of the Spirit-inspired author.'

In other words, the goal of biblical interpretation is not to ask myself, "What does this passage mean to me?" but rather "What did the original author, inspired by the Holy Spirit, originally intend to communicate when he said this?" To be frank with you, I don't care what this or that passage means to you. Why? Because meaning doesn't reside within you; meaning resides in how God intended the text to be interpreted by the original readers. But this is hardly ever the immediate task of modern day readers of the Bible.

Last time I drew your attention to a quote by Gordon D. Fee in his book *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*. I would like to remind you of the quote because it is so good. This is what Fee says about the immediate task of the interpreter of God's word.

On this one thing, however, there must be agreement: *A text [of Scripture] cannot mean what it never meant.* Or to put it in a positive way, the true meaning of the biblical text for us is what God originally intended it to mean when it was first spoken...

Someone will surely ask, 'But is it not possible for a text to have an additional [or fuller or deeper] meaning beyond its original intent? After all, this happens in the New Testament itself in the way it sometimes uses the Old Testament'... Our problem is a simple one: Who speaks for God? Roman Catholicism has less of a problem here; the magisterium, the authority vested in the official teaching of the church, determines for all the fuller sense of the text. Protestants, however, have no magisterium, and we should be properly concerned whenever anyone says he or she has God's deeper meaning to a

text—especially if the text never meant what it is now made to mean. Of such things all cults are born, and innumerable lesser heresies.¹

The Church On A Blind Date with Postmodernism

The church has many bad things to say about postmodernism, and rightly so. For instance, the average Christian in America who knows anything about the effects of postmodernism on our culture will lambaste postmodernism for its rejection of absolute truth. This is a good thing. However, one of the interesting realities is that although the majority of modern day American Christians have rejected postmodernism's rejection of absolute truth, they have completely fallen headlong in love with one of the most dangerous and damaging components of postmodern thought without even realizing it. What aspect of postmodernism has the church fallen headlong in love with? It is called 'reader-response criticism.' It is the conviction that the meaning of a text (or speech) does not lie within the intention of the original author, but rather within the reader. Postmoderns postulate that the reader creates meaning as he interacts with the content of a text.

In other words, they suggest that the goal of interpretation is not to extract meaning out of text that is already there, but rather that meaning is created as the reader has an encounter with the text. As the reader interacts with the text the offspring of a highly individualized meaning comes to life. Millard J. Erickson explains reader-response criticism as follows;

“According to the reader-response theory, meaning is not something that inheres as fixed within texts but is created or modified by the subjective response of the reader.”²

Do you see the problem with this? If a passage means “this” to me and “that” to you, it holds no inherent truth. *But what is the goal of reading the Bible? To be thoroughly transformed by being confronted with God's absolute, unchanging truth as infused into the word of God through the original intention of the author as he was moved by the Holy Spirit.* If meaning resides in the individual as opposed to residing within the text, the text of Scripture has no inherent meaning. Do you see the problem? Rejection of absolute truth rides on the back of the more radical forms of reader-response criticism. If a text has no inherent meaning and only takes on meaning as the interpreter engages it (even if you throw the Spirit in the mix), the text can mean whatever the interpreter interprets it to mean. And if a text can mean any given thing to any given person then the text really means nothing at all. The end result is that any given text can have an infinite number of meanings because there is no truth in it until you create it. And thus if a text can mean anything to anyone, then it is all a matter of perspective. But if the text has no inherent meaning, it cannot communicate absolute truth. Why? Because it doesn't contain absolute truth.

¹ Gordon D. Fee and Douglass Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 30-31.

² Millard J. Erickson and David S. Dockery, *New Dimensions in Evangelical Thought: Essays in Honor of Millard J. Erickson* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 226. For more on reader-response criticism see Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 278-281; Robert H. Stein, *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible: Playing by the Rules* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1994), 18-36; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?: The Bible, The Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 27-29, 151-153, 367-368, 393-398; Gordon D. Fee, *New Testament Exegesis: A Handbook for Students and Pastors*, 3 ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 181-185.

And, my friends, I am afraid that this is the way many modern day Christians approach the Bible. The only difference between secular postmodernism and the methods of modern day Christians is that Christians throw the Spirit in the mix, as if the Spirit's job were to create new meaning as the reader collides head-on with the text of Scripture. And here is where the rubber meets the road; do you go to the Scriptures to discover objective truth that has already been put there by the Holy Spirit through the original author, or do you go to find something that is not already there? Let me ask it another way; do you go to the Bible to create or to discover meaning?

And this ought to be the goal of interpretation; to extract God's truth as put there by the authors of the New Testament as they were moved by the Holy Spirit to write what they wrote. ***Meaning is found in the Spirit's original intention through the original author as it is bound up in the text.*** Let me throw two big, yet similar, words at you: our goal is to do *exegesis* as opposed to *eisegesis*. Exegesis means nothing more than an approach to the bible where you seek to extract meaning out of the text that is already there. Darrell L. Bock defines exegesis as follows;

“The term *exegesis* has its roots in the Greek term *exegeomai*, which means ‘to lead out of’ and so it means to ‘read out’ the meaning of the text.”³

Robert H. Stein likens the task of a bible reader to that of a gold miner. The goal of the interpreter according to Stein is not to create or invent meaning, but rather to discover meaning like a gold miner discovers gold. The gold miner does not implant the gold into the mountain. If he did, what would be the purpose of digging? He would just be retrieving what is already his. His purpose is to extract something from the mountain, gold. In the same way, the goal of the reader/interpreter of God's word is to extract meaning, the meaning that the Holy Spirit infused into the text through the intention of the original author.⁴ This is what exegesis is all about; extracting something that is already there.

It is sort of like drinking a milk shake from McDonalds; you stick your straw into the cup to suck out of the cup what is already there. We all hate backwashers. If you know that someone backwashes when they drink, you will never let them have a drink of your... well... drink. Why? Because they are going to be both extracting liquid and depositing liquid (which is gross). The goal of reading the Bible is to extract meaning without adding anything of ourselves into the Scriptures. This is what exegesis is all about.

Eisegesis, on the other hand, has to do with reading meaning into the text. We could call it spiritual backwashing. R.C. Sproul gives a helpful definition of exegesis and eisegesis.

Biblical scholars make a necessary distinction between what they call *exegesis* and *eisegesis*. *Exegesis* means to explain what Scripture says. The word comes from the Greek word meaning, ‘To guide out of.’ The key to exegesis is found in the prefix *ex*, which means ‘from’ or ‘out of.’ To exegete Scripture is to get out of the words the

³ Darrell L. Bock, “Opening Questions: Definition and Philosophy of Exegesis,” in *Interpreting the New Testament Text: Introduction to the Art and Science of Exegesis*; ed. by Darrell L. Bock and Buist M. Fanning (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2006), 23.

⁴ Stein, *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible*, 40. I understand that Stein's words in this specific text are directed at implications as opposed to root meanings; nonetheless, the principle is excellent. I am not yet to a point where I am dealing with implications. If I were, I would quote the whole paragraph.

meaning that is there, no more and no less. On the other hand, *eisegesis* has the same root but a different prefix. The prefix *eis*, also comes from the Greek, means ‘into.’ Thus eisegesis involves reading into the text something that isn’t there at all. Exegesis is an objective enterprise. Eisegesis involves an exercise in subjectivism.⁵

What is my point? The goal of interpretation is to discover the original intention of the author. There are three main questions that I am sure are driving you crazy at this point. I cannot deal with them in detail, but I will at least bring them up and say a word or two about each. The three questions are: “What about the role of the Holy Spirit in interpreting the Bible?”; “What about different perspectives?”; and “What about the reality of implications?”

3 Nagging Questions

1). What about the role of the Holy Spirit in interpreting the Bible? You may be saying, “What about the Holy Spirit? Are you saying that the Holy Spirit does not dynamically speak through His word?” Absolutely not! Of course the Holy Spirit dynamically speaks through His word. The question, however, is whether He confirms the truth of what He has already said through the original authors or whether he goes above and beyond what He has already said. As good Protestants, we embrace the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture. Everything that the Holy Spirit wanted to say, He has recorded in the written word. The question is not whether or not the Spirit speaks through His written word, but rather if He reveals truth that cannot already be dug out of the written word. There is a real sense in which the Holy Spirit only speaks what He has already spoken.⁶ I cannot deal in full detail this morning with this issue of the role of the Holy Spirit in biblical interpretation. I might deal with it the next time I preach, or I may just save it until we get to the end of 1 Corinthians 2, because Paul deals with it there.

What I will say is that meaning is not created when the Spirit, the text, and the believer collide. Meaning already exists in the text. In a nut shell, the Holy Spirit does not reveal truth above and beyond what He has said in His word; rather, His purpose is to take the truth of God’s word, inscribe it on the hearts of men, and give them a sort of sixth sense so that the truths of God’s word turn from mere conceptual, philosophical, one-dimensional conjectures to real, living, dynamic realities. The Spirit takes a doctrine like heaven and transforms it from a one-dimensional place to daydream about and gives it life so much so that as the Spirit reveals to you the truth of your eternal dwelling it becomes so real and living to you that you begin to actually revolve your life around it. He makes it such a reality to you, giving it real flesh and bones, that you begin to store your treasures up there, you begin to endure loss here for that kingdom there. Regardless of the circumstances here, you are joyful because heaven is not just a mere doctrine to you, it is a reality. The Spirit also works in the way of empowering us to live, believe, and obey the truth we learn.

I will deal with the other two nagging questions next week.

Conclusion

⁵ R.C. Sproul, *Knowing Scripture* (Accessible Publishing Systems, 2008), 42.

⁶ Once again, Goldsworthy is helpful here. ““Here we have two related problems affecting evangelical hermeneutics. The one is eisegesis, reading into the text an assumed meaning rather than trying to ascertain how the word is used in the biblical text. The other is allowing the importance of emotions, and an idea of Christian experience, to dull the objectivity of the word. It is in fact a form of reader-response hermeneutics in which the reader, often under the guise of being led by the Spirit, determines the meaning of the text. Gospel-centered hermeneutics sees Christ as the determiner of meaning.” Goldsworthy, *Gospel Centered Hermeneutics*, 175-76.

I understand that this morning's message was a bit more intellectual in approach. I believe that this morning's message, nonetheless, was vital. Why? Because you are all so much more influenced by your culture than you realize. And the majority of Christians do not seek to discover and extract (or exegete) the true intention of the original author (inspired and moved by the Holy Spirit). Because they believe that meaning resides within them, they seek to have a super-privatized encounter with the Spirit without a care as to the author's original intention. What I hope was made evident this morning is that such an approach to the word of God is not only dangerous, but that it renders you incapable of really hearing what the Spirit really wants you to hear. The Spirit moved the authors of the New Testament to write what they wrote. If you want to hear the voice of the Spirit you must seek first and foremost to discover and extract the original intention of the original author, because it was the Spirit who moved the author to write what he wrote. The voice of the Spirit should not be separated from the word of God. After all, the word of God is God's word. He speaks through His word because His word is His word.

And why is this important to you? Because the glory of God is at stake. Do you want to know Him? He has made himself known in the word (just read John 1:1-18 and 1 John 1:1-4). If you want to know Him more, you must behold Him where He has made Himself known, in His word. This is not a battle for the intellect alone, it is a battle for seeing and savoring the infinite glory of the Person of Jesus Christ.