

Fishing Tips Part II

2 Peter 1:20-21

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Introduction

This morning is going to be a continuation of last week's message. I really don't know how many weeks we will be discussing this particular topic. However, this past week I have been evaluating the importance and necessity of a sermon series on 'principles of biblical interpretation.' The more I think about it, the more I am convinced that such a series is necessary. I have been specifically considering the value of such a series in light of the 'Statement of Vision' that I presented two weeks ago.

SGF will be a body of believers which functions with the express purpose of producing lovers of Jesus who live, believe, and obey the entire Word of God.

As I stated two weeks ago, it is impossible to 'live, believe, and obey the entire word of God' if you do not know the entire word of God. The more accurate your understanding of the word of God the more accurate will be your life, belief, and obedience based on the word. *At the end of the day, if you have a sloppy understanding of the word of God it will result in sloppy living, believing, and obeying.*

Every Sunday you will find preachers across America railing from the pulpit; "Read your Bibles! Read your Bibles!" and yet very few preachers teach the people of God the basics of *how* to read the Bible with accuracy. As I stated last Sunday, there is a natural progression when it comes to the word of God, just as there is with everything else in life. For some reason we understand that when it comes to new believers and/or children; we start them out on the very basics of the Christian faith with a view to ramping them up. But as soon as a convert gets to a certain place the introductory lessons stop. At this point, the church either keeps her teaching at an introductory level to accommodate the immaturity of the folk in the pew, or she lunges forward leaving those who are less gifted with the word of God behind. It seems to me that there ought to be a progression. That is the purpose of this series.

Last week I had you consider 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.

You can come and feast upon the preaching and teaching of God's word once, twice, or even three times a week, but if you are not feasting upon God's word on your own, your walk with Christ will be shallow. When a person becomes a believer, it ought to be his/her goal to get to a place where he/she is able to feed on Christ on his/her own. This is not to discount the role of preachers, teachers, and leaders in the body of Christ. But it is to suggest that there is an unhealthy dependence many times in the lives of the people of God. Many assuage themselves; 'I shouldn't have to learn to all this complex theology; after all, I'm not a teacher or a preacher.' However, sir, how can you teach your children the word of God if you don't know it yourself? Or, how can you wash your wife with the water of the word if you don't know it yourself? And

the really bad news is that some pastors thrive upon the people's ignorance—some pastors love the thought that they will never be questioned.

This is one of my greatest passions; to teach the people of God how to read the word of God with accuracy. Last week we looked at two of the most basic principles of biblical interpretation, practice and getting the big picture. I will not be laying forth any principles of biblical interpretation this morning. Rather, I will be discussing what I probably should have presented last week. Sometimes our approach to the word of God is sloppy not necessarily because we are not employing the correct rules of biblical interpretation, but because we have faulty understandings about ourselves as interpreters and about the nature of the Bible. This is what I will be dealing with this morning. I will be seeking to prove two basic foundational points: 1. everyone is an interpreter and 2. the Bible is interpretable. The main purpose of this morning is to prove that there is a large human element in the task of reading our Bibles, as there is in absolutely every other aspect of our Christian lives. For example, we understand that although God is the mover and shaker of evangelism, we know that if we do not do our part in preaching the Gospel no one's getting saved. God ordains ends and means. God is the mover and shaker of prayer, and yet we know that we must discipline ourselves to pray. We see this tension all throughout the Scripture.¹

This same principle applies to the Scriptures; there is a human and divine element. Apart from the Spirit illuminating and working, you can read the Bible all you want, but it will be without profit. This, however, does not mean that God wants us to be passive in our approach to the Scriptures. And yet this is how so many people approach the word of God; they go passively expecting the Spirit to somehow impart to them supernaturally the correct interpretation of the passage. Without a doubt, the Spirit can do this—I do not want to put Him in a box. Nonetheless, a brain-in-your-pocket approach to the Scriptures more often than not results in poor interpretation and thus poor understanding. So let's consider these two foundational points.

Everyone is an Interpreter

The question you need to ask yourself is *not*, 'Am I going to be an interpreter?' but rather, 'Am I going to be a bad interpreter or a good interpreter?' Whether you like it or not, everyone is an interpreter. In fact, *you interpret all the time*. You are much more involved in interpretation than you realize. Interpretation is foundational to all meaning. You employ principles of interpretation every hour of every day. Apart from interpretation there is no meaning. Let me illustrate for you.

Men, suppose you are watching a football game and your wife comes walking into the room wearing a new dress and asks, "Honey, how do I look?" Think of all the different ways you could respond with the same exact phrase: "You look beautiful..." (sarcasm); "You look beautiful?" (skepticism); "You... look... beautiful!" (infatuation); "You! Look! Beautiful!" (pride); "You Look Beautiful!" (surprise); "You look beautiful" (confidence); "youlookbeautiful" (indifference). Women, are you not going to interpret your husband's words and body language? Husbands, do you really think that your wife is not going to interpret your words and body language? You use principles interpretation all the time without even knowing it. You are an interpreter whether you like it or not. The only question is whether you are a good or a bad interpreter. And I can tell you that the best way to become a good interpreter is not to care less about interpretation.

¹ The most classic example is Philippians 2:11-12 and Jude 1, 21, 24.

Consider another example. Suppose you pick up the Concord Monitor, open it up to the Sports section, and see the phrase ‘He scored.’ What is going to be your immediate thought? Well... it’s the sports page. You are going to begin interpreting immediately, aren’t you? Before even reading the article you are going to know that whoever ‘He’ is, ‘He’ scored some sort of a goal or basket. Suppose you open up the Concord Monitor to the financial section on another occasion and see the phrase ‘He scored.’ What is going to be your immediate thought? Well... it’s the financial page. Before even reading the article you are going to know that whoever ‘He’ is, ‘He’ scored some sort of a business deal or maybe ‘he’ got a certain score on a financial report. Suppose even further that you open up the Concord Monitor to the Celebrity Gossip section on another occasion (not that any of us read that section...) and see the phrase ‘He scored.’ What is going to be your immediate thought? Well... it’s the Celebrity Gossip section. You are going to begin interpreting immediately, aren’t you? Before even reading the article you are going to have an idea that whoever ‘He’ is, ‘He’ scored some sort of a phone number from an anorexic actress, or ‘He’ scored big on his latest box office movie, or that ‘He’ scored poorly on a breathalyzer test and had to spend the night in jail.

Without even reading the article or seeing the headline you will begin interpreting. You begin to interpret without even realizing it. We are all interpreters. What, then, makes the Bible so different? You grew up reading newspapers. The culture in which you live adopts certain rules and principles of interpretation. Because you grew up in this culture, interpreting words and phrases within this culture is has become second nature to you. You have learned these rules by virtue of your having grown up here. You don’t realize that you are interpreting because you have learned the ways of communication in this culture so well.

You have to make a decision this morning; are you going to be a good or bad interpreter? Get this junk out of your head that you are not an interpreter.

Gordon Fee says, *“The antidote to bad interpretation is not no interpretation but good interpretation, based on commonsense guidelines.”*²

You are an interpreter and you are either going to sign your life away to being good at interpreting or you are going to assign your life away to being a stinky interpreter. If you assign yourself to not caring about interpretation, you have by default decided to be a bad interpreter. A careless interpreter will be a bad interpreter. You will only be a good interpreter of the Scriptures if you work at it.

Put Them in Our Shoes

Now get creative with me. One of our famous sayings today is, “Put yourself in their shoes for a day, then you will understand.” I want to flip this on its head and say, “Put them in our shoes for a day, then they will understand.” Imagine if we were to find a man in a tomb in Israel who was cryogenically frozen in the first century. We take him to a lab, thaw him out, give him a copy of the Concord Monitor, and tell him (in his own language) to read it. How would he do? There would be an initial obstacle; he wouldn’t know English. So he would either first have to learn English well enough to translate the paper from English to his own language, or someone would have to do it for him. But this would just be the beginning of his task as an interpreter. He would have no concept of democracy or technology. He would be clueless as to

² Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 21.

the figures of speech and idioms we commonly use. The first time he would hear the phrase ‘its raining cats and dogs,’ he would run into a cave in fear of death. The first time hearing someone say, ‘This food is to die for’, he would question our sanity. Without a doubt, we have it much easier interpreting a text that was produced in the past than he would interpreting a text produced in the future. Nonetheless, if you can get some sort of an idea of how difficult it would be for a man from the first century to interpret a modern letter or newspaper, you might have a clue as to why interpreting the Bible poses such a challenge.

The reason why interpreting the Bible poses so many more problems for you than interpreting your local newspaper is because the authors of the Bible were writing to a people who lived in a completely different time, in a completely different culture, who spoke a completely different language. *Historically speaking*, the biblical writers were not writing to us. The authors of the NT were writing to a people in a completely different setting and these authors wrote using the language and conventions of their culture. Because of this we have a much more difficult hill to climb when it comes to interpretation than they did. We simply have to cross more cultural, historical, and literary boundaries than they did. They had much cultural, historical, and literary common ground with the authors of the New Testament. Therefore the message encoded in the words constructed by the original writers was encoded in such a way that an average first century man or woman in Palestine could decode with relative ease.

Without a doubt, Peter does say in regard to Paul’s Scriptural writings;

He speaks about these things in all his letters, in which are *some matters* that are hard to understand. The untaught and unstable twist them to their own destruction, as they also do with the rest of the Scriptures. (2 Peter 3:15-16)

So here Peter does say that *some* (not all) of Paul’s writings were ‘hard to understand.’ However, we must understand that the majority of what Paul wrote was accessible to the average joe. This must be seen. After all, the majority of what the apostles wrote in the New Testament was letters to struggling churches. How helpful would an undecodable letter be to a struggling church. The apostles were concerned with both accuracy and *clarity*. This does not mean that their writings were a cake walk (just read Romans, Hebrews, and Revelation), but it does mean that the majority of what they wrote was relatively accessible to the first century Palestinian. They would have been able to read the letters written by the apostles with as much as ease as we read informative and/or confrontational letters sent from our missionaries.

You could imagine if our church was intruded by savage wolves seeking to destroy the Gospel of Christ and divide the body. In response to such a horrific situation, one of our missionaries sends the elders of the church a letter confronting the false teaching with doctrine, exhorting the divisive in the church to repentance on biblical grounds. If, one of our missionaries was to write such a letter, would he not seek to write it with as much clarity and precision as possible? He would want it to be informative and understandable. After all, how helpful would such a letter be if it was not understandable?

I state all of this just to demonstrate for you why the Bible is more difficult for us to read than, say, an article in Sports Illustrated. The Bible, with a specific view to the letters of the New Testament, was written most directly (i.e., historically) to its original recipients. We are so far removed from them, sharing so very little cultural, historical, and literary common ground that it just makes sense that we have a steeper hill to climb when it comes to interpretation that they did.

I am convinced that biblical interpretation is not just for the scholars in the seminaries; it is for the people of God. Why? Because truth is for the people of God. And where is God's truth found? In God's word. So what am I saying in all of this? You are an interpreter whether you like or not. I am not saying that you have to be a scholar, but I am saying that you must be committed to reading the Bible with accuracy. When you go to the Scriptures the issue is not whether or not you will interpret; the question is whether you will interpret correctly or incorrectly. If you choose to not care whether you interpret accurately or not, you will be a horrible interpreter.

The Bible is Interpretable

My purpose in going through the content in point #1 was not to create in you this sense of impossibility. Rather, my purpose was to explain to you why you find the Bible to more difficult to read than the average piece of literature sitting around your house. The truth is that we do have a steeper hill to climb than those living in the first century. However, this does not mean that biblical interpretation is a lost cause. There are skeptics out there who suggest it is. I, on the other hand, am convinced it is not. Some suggest that the gap between the authors of the New Testament and the modern day reader is too far, there is far too little common ground for any sort of meaningful communication to take place. I disagree for many reasons which are not worth considering this morning.

On the other hand, some intimate that the Bible was written in some sort of an angelic tongue. They suggest that in order to interpret the New Testament you have to be able to attain a certain level of super-spirituality first. But this is nonsense. The Bible is spiritual in one sense but we must never see the truth of the Scriptures as something that can only be understood once one has reached a certain degree of super-spirituality. In what sense, then, is the Bible a spiritual book? Turn with me to 2 Peter 1:20-21.

²⁰ First of all, you should know this: no prophecy of Scripture comes from one's own interpretation, ²¹ because no prophecy ever came by the will of man; instead, moved by the Holy Spirit, men spoke from God.

“Scripture” in this passage is clearly a reference to both the Old and New Testament Scriptures. The fact that Scripture includes both the Old and New Testament's is made clear by 2 Peter 3:16-17 where Peter suggests that Paul's writings are part of the “rest of the Scriptures.” So the Bible is ‘spiritual’ in the sense that the authors of the word of God did not ‘make their stuff up.’ They did not ‘get their own material.’ Everything they said was given to them by the Holy Spirit. This passage speaks about the origin of the prophet's message. The message of the prophets did not originate from within themselves; they got it all from the Spirit.

Some have read way too much into the phrase “moved by the Holy Spirit.” They have suggested that the prophets went under a mystical trance which allowed the Holy Spirit to use them like a puppet. This theory is best known as the dictation theory. The sense of what they say (and this explanation is more than just a little sarcastic) is that Paul would take a sleeping pill and lay on his bed with a pen and pad on his night stand. As soon as he started to doze off the Spirit would pick up his hand and write for him. However, it can be clearly attested from the Scriptures themselves that although each of the New Testament writers (and Old Testament writers for that matter) wrote exactly what the Spirit wanted them to write, the Spirit in no way overshadowed the personality, passion, or uniqueness of each individual author. This is clearly seen for instance

when you compare and contrast the writings of Paul against the writings of Peter or Luke or John. Each of these authors have a clear style. They each preach a consistent message, but they each have their own unique emphasis.

You cannot read Paul, for instance, in 1 Thessalonians without coming away with a clear sense that Paul was completely himself when he wrote to the Thessalonians. Somehow in the providence God, the Spirit was able to ‘move’ Paul to write what He wanted him to write without completely overtaking him. The exact way in which this worked is a mystery, but the fact is clear.

Why does this matter? Because it is imperative that you understand that the Bible is not written in an angelic tongue. The Bible is written in real, coherent, conversational language. The Holy Spirit intended for the Scriptures to be written in a way that normal human beings could understand it.

Consider how William D. Mounce explains the nature of New Testament Greek, otherwise known as *Koine Greek*.

“As the Greek language spread across the world and met other languages, it was altered (which is true of any language). The dialects also interacted with each other. Eventually this adaptation resulted in what today we call Koine Greek. ‘Koine’... means ‘common’ and describes the common, everyday form of the language used by everyday people. It was not considered a polished literary form of the language, and in fact some writers of this era purposefully imitated the older style of Greek... Koine was a simplified form of classical Greek...”

Mounce explains the significance of God’s use of this language in the writing of the Scriptures;

“But there is a... lesson here that is perhaps a little closer to the pastor’s heart. God used the common language to communicate the gospel. The gospel does not belong to the erudite alone; it belongs to all people.”³

In other words, the Bible is interpretable. Interpretation is an uphill climb for those of us who share so little literary, cultural, and historical common ground with the original authors, but it is a doable climb. The true meaning of the Bible is not hidden in some super-spiritual Morse code, only accessible to super-spiritual Christians who have attained a degree of mystical insight. Rather, it is in the language of the common, every day, ordinary folk.

God desires to make Himself known. Surely, Jesus did speak in parables for the purpose of disguising His teaching from those who did not know Him (Matthew 13:11-17). But God desires to reveal Himself, His ways, and His will to His people. He has no desire to keep it hidden from His people. He has made His revelation plain to men in the Scriptures.

Conclusion

The content of this sermon is in no way intended to call into question the role of the Spirit in interpreting the Bible, but rather to understand that there is a large human element in the interpretive process. If anything, the majority of Christians err on the side of over-spiritualizing

³ William D. Mounce, *Basics of Biblical Greek: Grammar* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 1-2.

their reading of the Scriptures. Without the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit, opening eyes and warming hearts, an accurate understanding of the Word is useless. Nonetheless, the purpose of this morning's message is to awaken you to the human element of biblical interpretation. There is a dual authorship to the Bible; the Holy Spirit spoke His word through men in the fullness of their humanity. He continues to speak through the message of these men. In the same way the Spirit speaks to us through His word, not as we put our brains in our pockets, but as we approach the text as interpreters. The Spirit is the engine behind the Scriptures, but His role does not negate or diminish our role as interpreters. There is human and divine element in almost everything in the Christian life (evangelism, prayer, spiritual growth, etc.).

Sometimes we fail at the outset when it comes to reading and interpreting the Scriptures because we do not understand our role as readers. We emphasize the role of the Spirit in illumination to the neglect of our human role as interpreters. This, more often than not, results in poor interpretation and thus poor understanding. The goal is not to downplay our emphasis on the Spirit as the teacher and planter of truth. If anything, we need to have a greater understanding of the Spirit as teacher and planter of truth, but we must not neglect our responsibility as interpreters in the process.