

Fishing Tips Part VI
Colossians 3:16
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Introduction

This morning we will be continuing our present series on biblical interpretation, making this the sixth 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, 3. interpret first: application flows out of interpretation, and 4. interpret first: discover the original intention of the author. This morning I am not going to be dealing with any more issues related to principles of interpretation other than merely finishing up what has been said in regard to the fourth principle of interpretation. But before we get there I want to preface this series with yet another passage which stresses the importance of a series of biblical interpretation for the average, everyday Christian in the pew. To do so, turn with me to Colossians 3:16. I will warn you before we begin that three-quarters of this sermon will focus on Colossians 3:16.

Colossians 3:16

Consider the text with me.

Let the word of Christ dwell among you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

I want you to notice three things about this passage. *First, Paul issues forth one command.* Although it may look as if Paul is issuing forth four commands in this passage (1. ‘Let the word of Christ dwell among you’, 2. ‘teach’, 3. ‘admonish’, and 4. ‘sing’) there is only one true command (imperative) in the passage. In fact, Colossians 3:16 is an almost perfect reflection of Matthew 28:19 in regard to its structure. In Matthew 28:19 you have a command followed by two participles.¹

“Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations (the command), baptizing (a participle) them in the name of the Father and of the son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching (another participle) them to observe everything I have commanded you.”

So Jesus issues a command (“Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations”) and then he tells them how they are to make disciples. And how are they to make disciples? Well,

¹ A participle is a verbal adjective or noun.

that is where the participles come in. Disciples are made through the tasks of ‘baptizing’ and ‘teaching.’ Jesus’ approach to disciple-making involves baptism and teaching.

We see the same sort of structure here in Colossians 3:16; Paul has issued one command followed by three participles.

Let the word of Christ dwell among you richly (**the command**), teaching (**a participle**) and admonishing (**another participle**) one another in all wisdom, singing (**another participle**) psalms and hymns and spiritual songs...”

So Paul issues a command (“Let the word of Christ dwell among you richly”) and then he tells them how they are to go about fulfilling this command. And how are they to let the word of Christ dwell among them richly? By teaching and admonishing another and by singing songs to God with gratitude. Because of the nature of this morning’s message we will only be focusing on the first two of the three participles (teaching and admonishing).

Second, I want you to notice the communal nature of this command. The command is to ‘Let the word of Christ dwell among you richly.’ This command can only be fulfilled in the context of community. First of all, it is important to know that the word ‘you’ is plural in Greek. Most of your translations probably read; “Let the word of Christ dwell **in** you richly.” Although this a fine way of translating this phrase, Paul has been stressing body life, life in the community, from 3:8 up until this verse. Many have completely missed the force of Paul’s admonition revolving around taking off the old man and putting on the new man (see Colossians 3:9-10). This is not a highly privatized activity as most communicate it; just look at the nature of the putting off and taking on in 3:8-3:15. Notice how Paul describes the ‘new man’ in 3:9-12a;

“⁹ Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his practices ¹⁰ and have put on the new man, who is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of his Creator. ¹¹ Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free, but Christ is all and in all. ¹² Therefore, God’s chosen ones, holy and loved, put on heartfelt compassion, kindness...”

This is Paul’s description of the new man; which is why some Greek scholars have suggested that we should change the terminology of ‘the old man’ and ‘the new man’ to ‘the old humanity’ and ‘the new humanity.’ And why? Because the ‘new man’ (or ‘new humanity’) is most expressly characterized as a diverse community of individuals that have all been made one in Christ (“Christ is all and in all”).² Notice the word ‘Therefore’ in Colossians 3:12. This word is a tip off to the fact that the teaching which follows is based upon this reality—upon the fact that God has made a new community (a new humanity) in which there are no divisions in regard to social status, race, or prestige. This is a new community that finds its identity in the cross of Christ, a cross which puts all men on the same level. Thus, all of the ethical directives given by Paul in Colossians 3:8-15 have to do with getting the relationships of the believers in Colossae in sync with the reality of who they have become *as a community* in Christ.

Interestingly, Paul uses similar language in Ephesians 2:13-16 to talk about the new community (or ‘new humanity’ or ‘new man’) that Christ has made through his death. In Ephesians the ‘new man’ is clearly a reference to the New Covenant community. Observe the text.

² And this is a fine way of translating the noun *anthropos* as well.

But now in Christ Jeuss, you who were far away³ have been brought near by the blood of the Messiah. For He is our peace, who made both groups⁴ one and tore down the dividing wall of hostility. In His flesh, He did away with the law of the commandments in regulations, *so that He might create in Himself one new man⁵ from the two*, resulting in peace. He did this so that He might reconcile both to God in one body through the cross and put the hostility⁶ to death by it.

Consider Douglas J. Moo's comments on the corporate nature of this new man; "The text before us in Colossians goes on to claim that 'here' (most likely a reference to the 'new self') 'there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free' (v. 11). This language strongly suggests that the 'new self' is not a part of an individual or even an individual as a whole, but some kind of corporate entity. This suspicion finds strong confirmation in Ephesians 2:15, where Paul speaks of God's intention to incorporate both Jews and Gentiles in the church."⁷

It is in this context that we find our text. Paul is addressing the community. He tells them to, as a community, 'Let the word of Christ dwell among you (plural) richly.' In other words, this is a community project. This is something that the community does as a community. This is not a task for individuals to undertake in isolation from the body of Christ. Which is why I prefer the use of the word 'among' instead of the word 'in'. Paul is calling the Colossians to let the word of Christ dwell among them as a community.

This fact is even further supported by the phrase which follows it. How does the community let the word of Christ dwell among them richly? By teaching and admonishing one another. We call it mutual ministry; I minister the word of God to you and you minister the word of God to me. As I stated a few weeks ago; although God has specially gifted certain men with an extraordinary gift of teaching, this in no way negates the responsibility that all believers have to minister the word to one another. The only way that the word of Christ will dwell among us richly is if each individual in the body embraces his or her responsibility as a minister of the word. This is not to say that all of the saints in the body of Christ have an equal ability with the word of God, but it does mean that each and every believer has a responsibility to teach and admonish one another with the Word of God.

Paul's focus here is on the community; his concern is the community. In other words, this is not a call for all Christians to go out and focus all of their attention on their own Christian journey. Christians should not live their Christian lives as if the greatest good is to get some personal spiritual fix. Rather, he is calling the people of God to think outside of themselves; to

³ This is a reference to the Gentiles (see Ephesians 2:11-12).

⁴ The two groups are the Jews and the Gentiles. Just read the context.

⁵ Although the language here (*kainon anthropon*) is not an exact mirror of what we find in Colossians 3:9 (*neon [anthropon]*), it is extremely close, and what is most important is that both contexts emphasize the new community created by Christ, a community where there is no longer any division between Jews and Greeks, etc. Douglas Moo says the following in regard to the difference in expression between Ephesians 2:15 and Colossians 3:9; "Some (esp. older) interpreters think that *neos* ("new") suggests, in contrast with *kainos*, the nuance of 'radically new'... But most interpreters rightly regard the two adjectives as having the same meaning in most contexts." Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*; The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), 267.

⁶ The hostility that existed among the Jews and Gentiles, that is.

⁷ Ibid.

see that their responsibility goes much deeper than mere personal spiritual advancement. His focus is on the community as a tangible expression of the reconciliatory power of the Gospel in the world. It would be reductionistic, however, to forget that communities are made up of individuals. I am not in any way denying that fact. And because that is a reality, we must each pursue Christ as individuals, but this is not where Paul's focus is.

If SGF wants to be a church which lets the word of Christ dwell among us richly, we must work at it together. If we do not pursue this as a community project, teaching and admonishing one another with the word of God, it will not happen. This is not something that a few leaders (or highly motivated saints) full of the Holy Spirit can accomplish; this is only something that can be accomplished when all of the people of God embrace their own responsibility in the task.

Without a doubt, this message will simultaneously produce an element of excitement in some of you and an element of annoyance in others. Those who find this community-driven pursuit of truth to be exciting do so because it gives you a sense of purpose and adventure. You are not a nobody in the body of Christ. You are not just a number; you are not just a warm body; you are not just another faceless name in the crowd. No, you are a vital component to the overall health, development, and growth to the Lord's work in the world. Your involvement and contribution in the body of Christ is just as vital as the involvement of your elders. The awesome weight that Paul puts on the shoulders of the community ultimately works to drag us out of our small me-centered worlds, catching us up into something much larger than ourselves.

Those who find this community-driven pursuit of truth to be annoying and burdensome do so because it demands much more out of you than you are willing to give. Some of you will have to give some things up in order to live the truth of Colossians 3:16. But many like the ways of Rome much more than the ways of the Spirit through Paul; they love the ministry of the word to be confined to the pulpit. Lazy, passionless people love America's spectator-event version of Christianity, where each member is either a servant or a recipient, but where no member is both at the same time. Paul is calling each and every member to be both a recipient of ministry and a contributor to the ministry.

But here is where the rubber meets the road: some of you will embrace the responsibility that God has placed at your feet and some of you will outright disregard what God has called you to; either way, whether you embrace or reject the responsibility, you will have to give an account. You are not exempt from the responsibility of fulfilling your responsibility as a member of the body of Christ (whether you be an official member of a local assembly or not) just because you don't want it. Try pulling the same stunt with the IRS. "Na, I don't pay my taxes because I really just don't want to; I can't handle the responsibility. You know... I've never been a numbers guy. Do you know how much work it takes to get an accountant, collect all your receipts, gather all of your information, and keep track of all of your records? It's just not for me." When Uncle Sam comes knocking at your door, no matter your excuse, you will have to pay up. This is what the Parable of the Talents (told by Jesus) is all about (Matthew 25:14-30).

When Jesus comes back, he will have a sit down with teachers and leaders, without a doubt. After all, James warns us that not many should be teachers because teachers will 'receive a stricter judgment.' (James 3:1) But this does not mean that all non-formal teachers are off the hook. Observe the word 'stricter.' The idea is not that teachers will be the only ones who have to give an account, but simply that, given the weight of responsibility, teachers will be held to a higher standard. The 'er' on the word 'stricter' should tip us off to the fact that all believers will have to give an account. If that were not true there would be no reason for James to compare the

judgment that teachers will receive to any other sort of judgment, but he does (hence the ‘er’ on the word ‘stricter’).

Third, consider with me the similarities between Colossians 1:28 and 3:16. The majority of translations completely miss the boat in the way that they translate Colossians 1:28 and Colossians 3:16. Really, the only two translations which demonstrate the clear similarity in thought are the NASB (which does it perfectly) and the NIV (which does it adequately). Let’s take a look at both of these passages side by side.

Colossians 1:28; “We proclaim Him, warning and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ.”

Colossians 3:16; “Let the word of Christ dwell among you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom...”

Now look at it in the NASB. The NASB is really the only translation which attempted to keep the parallel as exact as it is in the original language.⁸

Colossians 1:28 (NASB); “We proclaim Him, **admonishing** (*nouthetountes*) every man and **teaching** (*didaskontes*) every man **with all wisdom** (*en pase sophia*)...”

Colossians 3:16 (NASB); “Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, **with all wisdom** (*en pase sophia*) **teaching** (*didaskontes*) and **admonishing** (*nouthetountes*) one another.”

In Colossians 1:28 Paul is explaining his ministry as an apostle, in Colossians 3:16 he is explaining the Colossians’ ministry as an individual assembly. The obvious difference between the two is that Paul’s ministry as an apostle was directed toward “every man” while the ministry of the saints in Colossae was to be directed to ‘one another.’ However, you can see that Paul calls the Colossian believers to engage in the same sort (as opposed to the exact sort) of ministry that he himself has been called to. He calls them to **teaching** (*didaskontes*) and **admonishing** (*nouthetountes*) **with all wisdom** (*en pase sophia*).⁹ Paul describes their responsibility as ministers of the word with near perfect word-for-word similarity as he describes his own ministry. What is abundantly clear is that Paul is calling the Colossian believers to engage in the same sort of ministry that he himself has engaged in. In essence, what Paul is saying is, “Colossians, what I do in my traveling ministry as an apostle, you do to one another in the context of the local church in Colossae.”

He is informing them that God holds them responsible to teach and admonish one another in the same way that God is holding him responsible to teach and admonish every man. I believe that these two passages, almost more than any other passages in the Bible, are useful to prove that all of God’s people are ministers, and that while God has certainly empowered, gifted, and called select individuals to perform specific tasks and to fulfill certain responsibilities, He has

⁸ I am indebted to Gordon D. Fee for pointing out the relationship between 1:28 and 3:16. See Gordon D. Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 649-650.

⁹ Notice the inversion of ‘with all wisdom,’ ‘admonishing,’ and ‘teaching’ in Colossians 1:28 to ‘teaching,’ ‘admonishing,’ ‘with all wisdom’ in Colossians 3:16. It resembles the form of a chiasmatic construction.

nonetheless called and gifted each and every believer to be a minister of the word, one to another.

The obvious conclusion is that you cannot teach and admonish one another with the word of God if you are not growing in your ability to handle the word of God. Whether you like the responsibility imposed on you by the Spirit through Paul here in Colossians 3:16 is not an issue. The fact is that God has called you to be a minister of the word; He has called you to be a contributor to the body of Christ. SGF will never be a body in which the word of Christ dwells richly if each member (in the 1 Corinthians 12:24-27 sense of the word ‘member’) does not pick up his or her pack. Good preaching and teaching from pulpits and lecterns alone does not produce healthy churches. This is the rationale behind a series on biblical interpretation. Is biblical interpretation for the average joe in the pew? Well, let me ask you a question; Is every average joe in the pew called to teach and admonish one another with the word of God? Does God hold every believer responsible to minister the word one to another? Of course! Well then, if God calls all His kids to teach and admonish one another with the word, then all God’s kids had better grow in their ability to handle the word so that they might be able to minister the word one to another.

What is at stake if we do not hold each other accountable to the task of teaching and admonishing one another? Paul says, “Let the word of Christ dwell among you richly.” The way in which that is to take place is through a community-driven effort at teaching, admonishing, and singing. What is at stake is the indwelling of the word of Christ in the community of the saints.

Principles of Biblical Interpretation

- 1. Practice*
- 2. Get the Big Picture*
- 3. Interpret First: Application Flows Out of Interpretation*
- 4. Interpret First: Discover the Original Intention of the Spirit-Inspired Author*

Since I spent so much time expositing Colossians 3:16, I obviously do not have room enough to go into any depth this morning in laying out any new principles of biblical interpretation. However, last week we did not quite finish our discussion on principle # 4 (*Interpret First: Discover the Original Intention of the Spirit-Inspired Author*). The main point that I have been attempting to prove over the past three weeks is that the immediate goal of bible reading is interpretation and that the immediate goal, or first task, in the process of interpretation is to discover the original intention of the Spirit-inspired author. I have been stating that the first question that you must ask when you approach a text is not, “What does this passage mean to me?” but rather “What did the Holy Spirit, through the intention of the original author, intend to communicate when He said this?” And why? Because meaning does not lie within you, the reader, but within the original intention of the original author (inspired by the Holy Spirit) as it is bound up in the text. I quoted two weeks in a row a paragraph from Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart from their book, *How to Read the Bible for all Its Worth*, where they stated that the Bible cannot mean what it never meant. It means what the Spirit intended it to mean.

I discussed the difference between exegesis and eisegesis. I stated that exegesis is the task of extracting from the text the truth that is already there, while eisegesis is where the reader reads meaning into the text (or where reader create meaning). I likened exegesis to drinking a milk shake form McDonalds. You get your straw, stick it in the cup, and suck the contents that are already in the cup out of the cup. This is what exegesis is all about; you take your straw, stick it into the word of God and suck out of the word of God the truth that was already put there by the

Holy Spirit. Eisegesis, on the other hand, is likened to backwashing—when your saliva drools back into the shake and the liquids mix. Eisegesis is when we backwash our own ideas back into the text.

I then stated that there are probably three questions which are nagging at least some of you in the congregation. I began to address those questions at the end of last week’s message. The questions were: “Is Jimmy saying that the Holy Spirit no longer dynamically speaks to His people?”; “What about different perspectives?”; “What about the reality of implications?”

I was able to answer the first question last week. My answer was an unequivocal ‘NO.’ Of course the Holy Spirit still dynamically speaks to His people. The question, however, has to do with the content of His speaking. The Holy Spirit speaks what He has already spoken through the authors of the New Testament. I then stated that the primary role of the Holy Spirit in regard to Bible reading is *not* to supernaturally reveal the correct interpretation of a passage to us. This is why unbelievers can correctly interpret the Bible and have an accurate intellectual understanding of the Gospel and yet not be born again. On the other hand, the primary role of the Spirit in regard to Bible reading *is* to take the truth of what we have learned from the Word of God and reveal the reality of it to our hearts, transforming it from a one-dimensional, philosophical or intellectual concept to a living, breathing, dynamic reality—revealing the reality of the truth to us so much so that the truth begins to change our values, decisions, and even our disposition. Second, I stated the Spirit also gives the ability to live, believe, and obey the truth we acquire from the word of God.

This is where we left last week. I will pick up from here and answer the two remaining questions.

2). What about different perspectives? You could imagine if the church were to give me, Kevin, and Moe the assignment of separately teaching John 3:16-18. Imagine if Kevin were to preach the first week, I were preach the second week, and then Moe were preach the third week. How similar would our sermons be? They would be quite different, wouldn’t they? Of course they would. Many would assume that the difference would be a sure evidence of a fundamental disagreement in regard to interpretation. But this is not necessarily the case. Moe, Kevin, and I could be on the same exact page in regard to our understanding of the author’s original intent, but then present it in three completely different ways. We see this with the Gospel’s, don’t we? We see four men who wrote four Gospels and yet approached the same content in completely different ways. This did not mean that they had a fundamental disagreement in regard to how they interpreted the words, person, and works of Christ. Their differences, rather, lay in their unique personal emphases, their unique purposes for writing, and their unique theological and practical emphases. We must not confuse a difference in approach with a fundamental difference in interpretation. In other words, Jesus’ words did not mean one thing to Peter and another thing to John. They meant the same thing to both of them, but the way they presented (or packaged) the words of Jesus resulted in new, dynamic, and highly individualized approaches. So, I am all for varying perspectives and emphases when it comes to presenting the truth of God’s word, but this does not mean that I believe that the word can mean one thing to me and another thing to Kevin, and yet another thing to Moe. It means whatever the Spirit, through the original author, intended to mean.

3. What about the reality of implications? Can’t a passage have many different implications? Of course a passage can have many implications. An implication is something that is not explicitly stated in the passage and yet sheds light on something relating to the content of the passage. In other words, although 1 Corinthians 15 does not explicitly say anything about

marriage or (let's say) the sovereignty of God, certain lines of implication can be drawn from the contents of 1 Corinthians 15 that speak indirectly to these two weighty biblical matters. I would go even further to say that a passage can have any number of theological and practical implications. But let's get one thing straight; before we move on to theological and practical implications we must first establish the Spirit's original intention in what He wrote. In the same way that application flows out of interpretation (as was argued a few weeks ago) implications flow out of interpretation. You cannot draw lines of implication, either theological implications or practical implications, until you first determine what the original author intended to communicate. In order to make an implication, you first have to have raw data to work with. In the same way that you have to have interpreted truth to apply truth, you have to have interpreted truth to draw lines of implication. Any given passage can have an incalculable number of implications, but those implications must flow out of a correct interpretation of the passage or the implications will be prone to be misguided or even misleading.¹⁰

Conclusion

Why are principles of biblical interpretation important for you, the average joe Christian in the pew? Because God has called and equipped you to be a minister of His word. You have a critical part to play in the body of Christ. Your Christian life is not just about you, it is about God's glory, His blood-bought bride (the church), His kingdom. Your primary purpose in life should not be to seek a highly privatized, each-man-fend-for-himself spirituality. God saved you to serve. Part of the service that He has called all believers to is the ministry of the word. But in order to minister the word, you must have a handle on the word. You must grow in your ability to understand it, apply it, and teach and admonish one another with it. Apart from each member fulfilling their own word-based ministry in the church, the word of God cannot dwell among us richly. We are all vital to the health, growth, and development of the body of Christ. You have a great responsibility. It is not a matter of whether this is 'your thing' or not; rather, it is a matter of the fact that God has called all of His kids to minister the word to one another. You must be diligent in growing in an ability with the word of God regardless of your place in the body of Christ.

¹⁰ Now I can lay forth in full the quote I made mention of last week by Robert H. Stein regarding the reality of implications. "The goal of biblical interpretation is to understand not just the specific meaning of the authors of Scripture but also, by understanding their willed pattern of meaning, to understand the various implications. These implications are not 'determined' by the interpreter, however. On the contrary, they are determined by the author. By his willed pattern of meaning the biblical author has delineated what the implications of his meaning are. The interpreter of Scripture ascertains or discovers these implications, but it is the author alone who has determined them. The interpreter seeks to discover the various implications of the author's willed type much like a miner digs into a mountain to discover gold. Even a miner does not make the gold in the mountain, so the interpreter does not make the implications of a text's meaning. Both seek to discover what is already there. The miner seeks to discover the gold that God created and that lies in the mountain. Similarly, the interpreter seeks to discover the implications of the author created and that lie in his willed pattern of meaning." Robert H. Stein, *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible: Playing by the Rules* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1994), 40.