

***Fishing Tips Part IV******Hebrews 3:12-13****Jimmy Snowden**Sovereign Grace Fellowship: Sunday, January 31, 2010****Introduction***

We will be continuing our series on principles of biblical interpretation this morning. 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 key foundational realities: 1. we are all interpreters and 2. the Bible is interpretable, and three principles of interpretation: 1. practice, 2. get the big picture, and 3. interpret first: application flows out of interpretation. This morning we are going to be considering one more principle of biblical interpretation. Before we do so, however, I first want to discuss even further the relevance of a series on principles of biblical interpretation.

***Preface: Interpretation is for Everyone***

As I have done each week since I have begun this series, I will begin the sermon by prefacing the series as a whole. I am sure that some of you are wondering whether or not such a series is for you. You may be under the school of thought which presupposes that precision in regard to biblical interpretation is something for seminary professors, bible students, pastors, and teachers but not for the average joe in the pew. Although the Spirit has gifted each and every saint in the body of Christ differently, giving some a greater ability to handle the word with accuracy than others, a series on principles of biblical interpretation is still, nonetheless, for the average joe Christian sitting in the pew. To suppose that interpretation is for the elite alone reveals a fundamental flaw in our thinking in many respects.

Although the New Testament does communicate that the Holy Spirit uniquely gifts certain Christians with the gift of teaching (Romans 12:7; 1 Corinthians 12:29; Ephesians 4:11), we often times mistakenly assume that the task of teaching falls solely on their shoulders. While those who have been given the gift of teaching will certainly exercise the gift of teaching in greater and more diverse ways than those who have not been given this gift, it must be asserted that all Christians are called to minister the word of God to one another. Only some Christians have been given the formal gift of evangelism (Ephesians 4:11), and yet all God's kids are to evangelize (Matthew 28:18-20 and Colossians 4:1-5); although only some Christians have been given the formal gift of giving (Romans 12:8), all God's kids are to give (2 Corinthians 8-9). The same goes for ministering the word. Let me direct you to a few texts of Scripture to prove my point.

***Ephesians 6:4***

I will make my point by addressing the fathers in the room. Let me ask all the fathers; "Has God called you to be a teacher of the word of God?" Turn with me to Ephesians 6:3;

*And fathers, don't stir up anger in your children, but bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord."*

Fathers, if you are not teaching your children the content of the word of God you are, biblically speaking, a negligent and disobedient father.<sup>1</sup> This is something that has struck me of late; a child's true youth pastor is his/her mother and father. Youth pastors are modern day conventions; you find them nowhere on the pages of Scripture. This does not mean that there is anything wrong with youth ministries, but it does mean that a church's youth pastor/leader must never be seen as a replacement teacher or discipler for parents. So you are a teacher after all! God has given you the awesome responsibility of administering the word to your children. Whether you have been given the formal gift of teaching is not the point; the fact is that God has called you to teach your children. And mothers, before you start to feel like you have been let off the hook, it must be known that the word which Paul uses for 'fathers' (*pateres*) in Ephesians 6:4 is used as a general reference to 'parents' elsewhere (see Hebrews 11:23).<sup>2</sup>

Now here comes the point of contact; fathers (and mothers), how can you 'bring them [your children] up in the training and instruction of the Lord' if you are not growing in an ability to rightly handle the word of God?

#### *Ephesians 5:22-28*

The same sort of responsibility is given to husbands regarding their wives in Ephesians 5:22-28.

*Wives, submit to your own husbands as to the Lord, for the husband is head of the wife as also Christ is head of the church. He is the Savior of the body. Now as the church submits to Christ, so wives should [submit] to their husbands in everything.*

*Husbands, love your wives, just as also Christ loved the church and gave Himself for her, to make her holy, cleansing her in the washing of water by the word. He did this to present the church to Himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but holy and blameless. In the same way, husbands should love their wives as their own bodies.*

Obviously, the way in which Christ cleansed the church 'in the washing of water by the word' is much different than the way in which a husband seeks to be an agent of producing Christ-likeness in his wife by ministering the word to her. Nonetheless, the precedent is set; a husband who does not minister the word to his wife is a negligent and disobedient husband. This does not mean that he must be a biblical scholar, but it does mean that he ought to be growing in his ability to handle and minister the word of God with accuracy and precision. Husbands, here is

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<sup>1</sup> This same principle can be found in Deuteronomy 6:4-6 (known as the *Shema*) as well. "Listen, Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is One. Love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. These words that I am giving you today are to be in your heart. **Repeat them to your children Talk about them when you sit in your house and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Bind them as a symbol on your forehead. Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.**"

<sup>2</sup> Swanson, J. (1997). *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains : Greek (New Testament)* (electronic ed.). Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

where the rubber meets the road; how can you wash your wife with the word if you have no handle on the word?

*Hebrews 3:12-13*

As you have noticed, the two passages considered above were addressed to parents and husbands. For the sake of covering all the bases I want to draw your attention to Hebrews 3:12-13.

*Watch out, brothers, so that there won't be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart that departs from the living God. But encourage each other daily, while it is still called **today**, so that none of you is hardened by sin's deception.*

**I want you to notice four things about this passage.** *First, consider the meaning of the word 'encourage.'* It literally means to exhort, edify, or comfort. When the author of the Letter to the Hebrews commands his readers to 'encourage each other,' he is *not* commanding them to casually compliment each other. In other words, as good as such a thing may be, you are not fulfilling the command of Hebrews 3:13 if you come up to me after the service today and say, "Nice pants! Where did you get those; they look so nice on you." Although that is a form of encouragement, it is not the sort of encouragement that our author is commanding in this passage. Rather, the sort of encouragement commanded in Hebrews 3 has everything to do with building one another up and exhorting one another with the promises of God. And where are the promises of God found? In the word of God. At its most basic root, this command has everything to do with the ministry of the word—encouraging one another, exhorting one another, calling each other to action and perseverance with the word of God.

*Second, notice the frequency of the command.* How often are we supposed to 'encourage one another' (in the promises of God)? Daily! This is not something that takes place once a week on Sundays or twice a week on Sundays and Wednesdays. This is something that is to be done as a regular part of life.<sup>3</sup> This passage (and others like it) lead me to the conclusion that *although preaching and teaching are essential and should be central in the life of the church, I would suggest to you that, in a healthy church, the greater part of the ministry of the word does not take place behind pulpits and lecterns, but rather in the everyday lives of the people of God as they minister the word of God to each other as they mutually experience the ups and downs of life.*

How do I come to this conclusion? Because we are to be exhorting one another with the word of God 'daily.'

*Third, notice who this command is directed at.* Is this command directed at the leadership alone? No! This command is directed at the body. Paul introduces the command by addressing it to the "Brothers."<sup>4</sup> In other words, no one escapes the duty of administering the word to one another. This is a community-based task, and all must take part. The clergy/laity distinction created by the Roman Catholic Church completely rips passages like this to shreds. All of God's people are ministers. So, are you a teacher? Well... maybe not in the Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, or Ephesians 4 sort of a way, but one thing is for sure, you are a minister of the word of God. If you are not ministering the word of God to your fellow believers, you are not an obedient Christian, period. I am not suggesting that you must be able to lead your brothers and sisters in

<sup>3</sup> Once again, reflecting the *Shema* in Deuteronomy 6:4-6.

<sup>4</sup> The TNIV translates it, "brothers and sisters..." to get the full intention of the author. In other words, this is a command that is to be obeyed by men and women alike.

Christ in an exegetical study through Romans, but I am suggesting that a Christian who does not encourage and exhort the saints with the word of God ‘daily’ is a disobedient Christian.

*Fourth, take note of what makes obedience to this command necessary.* What is at stake if we do not, as a community, minister the word to one another ‘daily’? The answer is stated in two different ways: 1. departing from the living God and 2. becoming hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. What is at stake if we do not minister the word of God one to another in the context of community? Perseverance. The author clearly communicates that the way in which the believer keeps him/herself from falling into the snare of the devil is by mutually drenching each other with the promises of God (the promises of both blessing and judgment) as found in the word of God. What is hanging in the balance if we do not mutually minister the word to one another? To fail in the task of every member ministering the word to one another does not just result in Christians who will not live ‘the blessed life’; perseverance in the faith itself is what is at risk.

Here is where the rubber meets the road: how can you minister the word of God to one another, how can you encourage/exhort one another in the promises of God as revealed in the word of God, if you do have an ability to handle the word of God?

All of God’s kids need a good series on principles of biblical interpretation. And why? Because all of God’s kids are commanded by God to be ministering the word of God to one another. Surely, God has not called all of us to be formal, public teachers (see James 3:1); nonetheless, God has called all of us to teach, to communicate truth, to minister the word of God to each other.

If you have not noticed (maybe you have), I have prefaced absolutely every single one of these sermons on biblical interpretation with a statement about its relevance and importance for the people of God. This series would have actually only been about 3 weeks long if I did not spend so much time building a case for the necessity of such a series. Why, though, have I spent so much time arguing for the need for a series on biblical interpretation? Because **I know how we are conditioned to think. Most modern day Christians are not conditioned to think along the lines of Deuteronomy 6, Ephesians 5:25-27, Ephesians 6:4, and Hebrews 3:12-13; we are usually only conditioned to think along the lines of Romans 12:7; 1 Corinthians 12:29; Ephesians 4:11, and James 3:1. Because we emphasize the latter passages to the detriment of the former, we live in an unbiblical haze where non-elder or teaching believers feel that their responsibility to minister the word of God is not quite as important as those who are considered to be ‘professional ministers or teachers.’ But we must see the necessity of the ministry of the word on both levels. We must embrace both sets of passages.** Yes, God has especially gifted certain people for the public teaching of the Word, but the teaching and administering of the word, nonetheless, is a task that all Christians are to take part in.

### ***Principles of Biblical Interpretation***

Let us now move on to discuss another principle of biblical interpretation. This will be the fourth principle that we have considered thus far.

*Rule #1: Practice*

*Rule #2: Get the Big Picture*

*Rule #3: Interpret First: Application Flows out of Interpretation*

*Rule #4: Interpret First: Discover the Original Intention of the Author*

What is the immediate goal of biblical interpretation? My answer: To discover the original intention of the author (authorial intent). We believe that the authors of the New

Testament were moved by the Spirit in such a way that they wrote exactly what the Spirit wanted them to write without losing their own unique personality and emphasis in the process. In other words, the Holy Spirit did not take the authors of the New Testament scriptures out of real space/time history, suspending them above time, and have them write from the outside in. Rather, the Spirit worked in and through the writers of the New Testament in the context of real life as it was really unfolding in the author's life in the first century. And because we firmly believe this we firmly believe that God's message for us today lies in what the original authors of the Scriptures, inspired by the Holy Spirit, *intended* to communicate to their original audience. And thus meaning does not lie within me the reader, but rather in the original intention of the original 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, 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.

This is how we operate in every other sphere of life. Isn't it? This is essential to any sort of meaningful communication. For example, one of the things that I do to get under Kristal's skin (in a fun way as opposed to a patronizing way) is I will interpret her words in an absolute literal fashion without a care as to what she is intending to communicate. While engrossed in the task of putting James in his car seat, I will stroll up next to her with her purse. I will extend the purse to her and say, "Here's your purse." She will then respond, "One second, please." And for the sake of making life a bit more difficult I will laughingly say, "One one-thousand! Okay, here's your purse." She will then frustratingly (in a fun way, of course) blurt out, "Jimmy, literally, I will be done in a second." To which I will again reply (while laughing), "One one-thousand! Here's your purse. You told me that you would 'literally' be done in a second."

The reason why I, like a goober, laugh at myself is because I know full well how Kristal intends for her words to be taken. I know that by 'literally, I will be done in a second,' she really means, "hold on to your pants, I am really really really really close to finishing what I am doing. It may take me longer than a second or ten, but I am so closed to being finished that it won't ruin your day to wait until I am done." This is how she intends "literally, I will be done in a second" to be taken (or interpreted), and that it is why it is slightly funny and completely annoying when I verbally count, "One, one-thousand!"

Why is this so important? Because most Christians are not conditioned to think this way when it comes to reading Scripture. For some reason we throw out all of the normal rules of communication (whether written or spoken) when we approach the word of God as if God had no intention on communicating with His people in their own conventional language.<sup>5</sup> In every other sphere of communication (whether written or spoken) we understand that meaning lies in the intention of the author. We understand that our primary job as listeners and/or readers is to extract out of the dialogue or text the intention of the speaker or author.

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<sup>5</sup> This is the case many times because of a rejection of the humanity of the Scriptures. Without a doubt, the Scriptures have a human and a divine aspect to them. Consider the following quote from Graeme Goldsworthy in this regard, "We avoid both a docetic Bible and a docetic reader. This is not to ignore the divine inspiration of the word and the ministry of the Holy Spirit in authorship, transmission and in the believer's reading, but it is to take full account of the humanity of the Bible and of the reader." Graeme Goldsworthy, Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel Centered Hermeneutics: Foundations and Principles of Evangelical Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 301.

Consider what Gordon D. 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.<sup>6</sup>

### *Reading the Bible in the Same Way that You Make Goals*

I am a goal setter. I love the task of setting and making goals. I am a task/goal oriented person. This is just the way that God has made me. Whenever I sit down to write up my goals I always operate on a three tier basis: immediate goals, short-term goals, and long term goals. Immediate goals are goals that I want to accomplish within the week; short-term goals are goals that I want to accomplish in the next few weeks and months. Long term goals are goals that I want to accomplish anywhere from a year to twenty years from now. The interesting thing about goals is that if you do not fulfill your immediate goals, you can kiss your short-term goals goodbye, and if you do not fulfill your short term goals, you can kiss your long term goals goodbye. The key to fulfilling your long term goals is in making the little 'in the moment' decisions throughout your daily life.

What I want to argue is that you should take a similar paradigm with you when you approach the word of God. You should set immediate, short-term, and long term goals. Here is how it looks. My immediate goal is to figure out how the author (inspired by the Spirit) intended this passage to be interpreted. Interpretation is your immediate goal. My short-term goal is to draw theological and practical implications and applications that flow from an accurate interpretation of the passage. My long-term goal is to put the theological and practical implications and applications to action. In other words, my long term goal is to live, believe, and obey this passage, as I have correctly interpreted and applied it, for the rest of my life. In the same way that you will never fulfill your short-term goals if you neglect your immediate goals, you will never move on to accurate biblical, theological, and practical implications if you do not do the dirty work of exacting interpretation (with an eye to discovering the original intention of the Spirit-inspired author). In the same way you will never fulfill your long-term goals if you neglect your short-term goals, you will never be able to live, believe, and obey the passage in view if you do not first draw theological and practical implications and applications from an accurate interpretation of a passage first.

### **Conclusion**

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<sup>6</sup> Gordon D. Fee and Douglass Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 30-31.

I believe that this morning's message was vital. Next time we will be discussing exactly how our postmodern culture has infected our understanding of how to arrive at biblical truth. We are all so much more influenced by our culture than we realize. The majority of Christians do not seek to discover and extract the true intention of the original author (inspired and moved by the Holy Spirit) as the first task of bible reading. 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 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 you are all ministers of His word whether you fulfill the formal role of teacher or not. This is relevant and important to all of you because it is central to your task as a minister of God's word. This is not merely for those teaching and learning at the seminaries; this is for every Christian.