

Fishing Tips Part III

Luke 11:52

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Introduction

This morning we will be continuing our series on biblical interpretation. I have cleverly 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 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 a correct understanding of God’s word. Two weeks ago we considered two principles of interpretation: practice and getting the big picture. We took a more foundational approach last week. Although I did not present any new principles of interpretation I sought to prove two basic points: we are all interpreters and the Bible is interpretable. My point was that our ability to interpret and apply the word of God is lacking because of a faulty understanding of the nature who we are as interpreters and of the nature of what the Bible is as God’s inspired word. This morning I will be presenting one more principle of interpretation.

Preface: Bearing my Heart

Before moving to our third principle of biblical interpretation, I feel the need to issue a word of warning about the danger of doing a series on principles of biblical interpretation. Turn with me to Luke 11:52.

Woe to you experts in the law! You have taken away the key of knowledge! You didn’t go in yourselves, and you hindered those who were going in.

Jesus levels this accusation against the “experts in the law.” The ‘experts in the law’ were the Scribes, the scholars of the day. They had an eye for focusing on the most miniscule details of the law; they had an eye for precision and accuracy. Jesus rails against these ‘experts’ because in their pursuit of precision and accuracy they lost or ‘took away’ (from others, it seems) the ‘key of knowledge.’ As J. Budziszewski says, “Though it always comes as a surprise to intellectuals, there are some forms of stupidity that one must be highly intelligent and educated to achieve.”¹ The Scribes would have definitely fallen into this category of stupid intellectuals.

It must be observed, however, that it was not the pursuit of accuracy and precision itself that caused the experts in the law to lose (or ‘take away’ from others) ‘the key of knowledge.’ Surely, they lost it in the pursuit of accuracy and precision, but it was not the pursuit of precision or accuracy itself that caused them to lose it. And this is where most modern day evangelicals go wrong; they suggest that it was the pursuit of biblical precision and accuracy itself that caused the experts of the law all of their spiritual problems. And thus they suggest that if we are to avoid the pitfalls of the Scribes and Pharisees that we must ditch any effort which approaches the word of God with an eye to accuracy and precision. But this is nothing other than nonsense. It was not the pursuit of accuracy and precision itself that led to the loss of the key of knowledge. What

¹ I first heard this when D.A. Carson quoted it in a sermon he preached on Romans 3 at Mars Hill Church (Seattle). See <http://theresurgence.com/a-day-with-dr-don-session-1-video>. The actual article by Budziszewski can be found at http://www.communicuejournal.org/q5_nihilism.html.

then caused them to lose it? Three things: 1. their pursuit of accuracy and precision had more to do with the content of their own, man-made legalistic tradition than it did with the Bible; 2. when they did pursue an accurate and precise knowledge of the Scriptures they did **not** do it as a pursuit of the living God; rather they pursued biblical precision and accuracy, the gaining of biblical knowledge, as an end in itself; 3. their hard, unregenerate hearts caused them to use the word of God as a tool to bolster their own pride and self-advancement. Bottom line: they did not pursue the knowledge of God through His word out of a desire to know the God revealed in the Scriptures.

The net result of such a non-personal pursuit of the truth of God's word was that it turned the Scriptures into a lifeless, moralistic, legalistic book.

I want to ask a question; How did Jesus combat the Pharisees and the Scribes in their wrong-headed approach to the word of God? Did he lambaste them for digging too deep into the word of God? No! How did he deal with their disastrous approach? Ironically, He led them to the word of God. Jesus didn't run from a precise and accurate understanding of the Word of God to combat the Pharisees, rather he dragged them further into an accurate and precise understanding of the word. Why? Because he saw that their fundamental problem was an inaccurate and imprecise handling of the word of God. Just read through the Gospels and note how many times Jesus accurately and precisely quotes from the Old Testament to show the knit-pick'n Scribes the error of their ways and thoughts. I will list just a sampling of passages from the Gospels which reveals Jesus' commitment to dragging the Pharisees into an ever-exacting understanding and use of the word to combat their wrong-headed ways; see Matthew 9:9-13; 12:1-4; 15:1-9; 19:1-12; 21:14-17; 22:34-46; Mark 7:1-16; 12:18-27 (and this is just a small sampling).

For further proof take a look just a page back at Luke 11:42 where Jesus rebukes the Pharisees for their neglecting the weightier matters of the law. Jesus says,

But woe to you Pharisees! You give a tenth of mint, rue, and every kind of herb, and you bypass justice and love for God. These things you should have done without neglecting the others.

Jesus berates the Pharisees **not** for yielding exacting obedience to the minutia of the law. In fact, He confirms them in their obedience. What, then, is Jesus problem with the Pharisees? It was that they neglected the weightier matters of the law. He says, "**These things you should have done without neglecting the others.**" If the Pharisees would have really known their Bibles with accuracy they would have known that 'justice and love for God' should not be lost in the pursuit of exacting knowledge and obedience. So Jesus does not pull the Pharisees away from the Scriptures to 'fix' the Pharisees, rather, He drags them deeper and deeper into the plain exacting emphasis of the text of Scripture.

Do you get it?! Jesus knew that the Pharisees' problem was not that they were overfilled with knowledge, but rather that their knowledge of the word was insufficient, misinformed, and inaccurate. In other words, how do we combat a lifeless, mere scientific pursuit of the knowledge of God's word? With the truth of God's word! That's how! You see, the American church has completely misdiagnosed the root of the problem of the Scribes and Pharisees, and thus her prescription is completely lost somewhere out in left field.

Their problem was not in the pursuit of accuracy, it was in their elevating their traditions above the word and then using the word as a tool to feed their own self-centered egos. This is how they 'took away the key of knowledge.' This is how they missed Jesus Christ, His kingdom,

and His gospel. So if I find some Christian somewhere pridefully digging into the particulars of the word of God to feed his/her ego, I will not call them away from the pursuit of an accurate understanding of the word of God, rather I will drag them further into it just as Jesus did with the Pharisees and Scribes. In other words, I will urge them to seek a real, living, and vibrant relationship with God not apart from His word, but through an ever accurate understanding of His word.

Nonetheless, the warning stands. We must be so very careful as we pursue an accurate and precise understanding of the word of God that we do not fall into the trap of the Scribes and Pharisees. I do run the risk of forming a bunch of Scribes who pursue the knowledge of God's word as an end itself, as opposed to being a tool for fellowship with God and His people. But it is worth the risk. How do you pursue an accurate and precise knowledge of the word of God without falling into the trap of the Scribes and Pharisees? Three things: 1. keep the Bible central, not the traditions of men, 2. pursue your knowledge of the word of God as a tool for knowing and serving Jesus, the living God of the Bible, and 3. pursue your knowledge of the word of God as a tool to serve others. These three rules are in direct opposition to the three motives of the Scribes and Pharisees as laid forth above.

Principals of Biblical Interpretation

Rule #1: Practice

Rule #2: Get the Big Picture

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

This morning we will be considering our third principal of biblical interpretation. This is one of the most self-evident and straightforward principles of interpretation and yet it is a pitfall for many many believers.

Just the other day I was provided the opportunity to change one of James' famous smelly poop diaper. As usual I took him in the bed room, put him on the changing table, got all of the necessary poop diaper-changing items out, cracked the smelly thing open, wiped him clean, and then threw all of the dirty contents in the trash. I then proceeded to get him ready to put a new diaper back on. Because James has sensitive skin we often times have to use desitin or other butt paste products to keep him from developing a rash on his bum. The interesting thing about desitin is that it is extremely pasty. If it doesn't stay on the butt and on your finger, if it finds its way anywhere else, you will have a massive mess on your hands. The stuff is sticky, pasty, and it clings to absolutely everything it touches. I remember more than once having to give James a bath only because the desitin got out of control.

I lifted up James' legs, got some desitin on my finger and proceeded to apply. After applying it I realized that both the baby fresh and the new diaper were way out of reach. This is one of the most important diaper-changing 101 rules; never apply butt paste without first opening up and positioning the diaper under the child. My left hand was occupied holding James' legs up so that he wouldn't get the paste on the changing pad and my right hand was full of desitin from dipping it into the container and applying it. After having something of a minor coronary, I found a way to get to the diaper, unfold it, and wrap him up good without making a mess.

Why do I tell this story? Because it communicates the idea that there is a process. If you apply butt paste without first opening up and positioning the diaper, you will have a mess. Getting the diaper opened and ready for deployment before applying the butt paste is essential if you don't want desitin to get all over everything. It is the 'cart before the horse' idea. If you put

the cart before the horse, how on earth can the horse pull the cart? He can't! That's the point. In the same way, there is a process in regard to bible reading.

The majority of Christians in America do just this when they approach the Bible; they put the cart before the horse, they put the desitin on before positioning the diaper. In what way do they do this? By immediately asking questions of application before determining questions of interpretation. The fact of the matter is that application flows out of interpretation.

This is partly an admirable sentiment in American Christianity. Christians don't want to just grow in the knowledge of God's word, they want to live it. This is commendable. However, to go to the word of God and sidestep the task of interpretation for the sake of immediate application more often than not results in weak, watered-down interpretation and application. The fact is that if you have a faulty interpretation of a passage, a faulty application will ensue. But we don't like to undergo the process of interpretation. Why? Because we like quick, fast, and immediate. But an application that is not based upon an accurate understanding of the truth will be at best, weak, and at worst, sinful.

Before I go on to give you a few examples of how application flows out of interpretation, let me first say that you **cannot** apply something until you have first interpreted it. It is a literal impossibility. Those who try to by-pass interpretation and jump right to application do not realize that they had to interpret to get to the point of application. Let me give you an example. I want you to apply this to your life.

“Green walls under the sun and you shall triangle the best of the best of the best.”

Unless you are either trying to be funny or difficult there is absolutely no way that you can apply the sentence above. Why? Because it has no meaning. You have no way of interpreting it. How can you apply it if you don't know what it means? And what is the process of figuring out what something means? Interpretation. If you are applying any given passage to your life, you have already done the work of interpretation. The question is whether your interpretation has been good or bad, precise or sloppy. And as I stated last week, good interpretation generally does not happen by accident. If you want to be a good interpreter, you must try to be a good interpreter. The scary thing is that application flows out of interpretation—interpretation informs application.

Matthew 5:27-30

Let me demonstrate for you how important interpretation is to the task of application. Turn with me to Matthew 5:27-30.

*27 "You have heard that it was said, **Do not commit adultery.** 28 But I tell you, everyone who looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 29 If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of the parts of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. 30 And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of the parts of your body than for your whole body to go into hell!*

Interestingly enough, this morning as I came in the building I noticed something absolutely astounding. I walked around and I noticed that every single one of you... wait... let

me take a look... Yep! every single one of you have two eyeballs in your head. Are you going to tell me that not even one of you has ever looked at a woman with lust, or that not even one of you women have looked at a man with lust? Do you have no desire to fulfill the commandments of Christ? How is it that the majority of the people here have looked at a woman or a man with lust and yet everyone still has both eyes? Do you not interpret the Bible literally? Well, it depends on what you mean by 'literally.' Right? If by literal you mean that I interpret the Bible as the original authors, inspired by the Spirit, intended it to be interpreted; then, 'Yes,' I interpret the Bible literally. But if by literal you mean that I interpret the Bible with wooden literalness without a concern as to the original author's intention; then, 'No,' I don't interpret it literally.

Why is it that all of you have both of your eyes? It has everything to do with how you interpreted Jesus' words. You understood that Jesus did not intend for this command to be taken literally. If he did, all of his disciples would have been blind within the first week, day, or hour of their life with Christ. You understood that Jesus was using hyperbole (a literary technique where the author or speaker speaks in extremes, or overstates, in order to get his main point across) and because you did not interpret Jesus' command literally, you did not apply it in a literal fashion either. Your application of this passage flowed out of your interpretation of this passage. If any of you come next week with your hand chopped off or one of your eyes plucked out I am going to ask you about your methods of interpretation.

Some scholars have suggested that the early church father, Origen, because he personally disciple young men and women, literally castrated himself out of obedience to this command. Although this is hotly debated,² the point is clear; Application flows out of interpretation. If you interpret this literally, you will apply it literally. If you interpret this passage with the understanding that Jesus was merely speaking in extremes to communicate the seriousness and 'deadly effects' of sexual sin, you will interpret it figuratively. Your application will be determined by your interpretation.

Colossians 3:2

Before reading Colossians 3:2 in full, I want to read Joel Osteen's teaching on Colossians 3:2a in his book "Your Best Life Now." After reading Osteen's teaching, we will take a look at the passage and observe how his faulty interpretation led to an unbiblical application. Osteen uses Colossian 3:2a as a theme verse in a section titled, **Program Your Mind for Success**. He says;

It's important that you program your mind for success. That won't happen automatically. Each day, you must choose to live with an attitude that expects good things to happen to you. The Bible says, 'Set your mind and keep it set on the higher things.' When you get up in the morning, the first thing you should do is set your mind in the right direction. Say something such as 'This is going to be a great day. God is guiding and directing my steps. His favor is surrounding me. Goodness and mercy are following me. I'm excited about today!' Start your day with faith and expectancy, and then go out anticipating good things. Expect circumstances to change in your favor. Expect people to go out of their way to help you. Expect to be at the right place at the right time.

Osteen continues applying Colossians 3:2a.

² For more see John Anthony McGuckin, *The Westminster Handbook to Origen* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 6.

Expect things to change in your favor.

Perhaps you work in sales, and you are scheduled to give an important presentation. You're really hoping to snag that big contract. Don't be surprised if you hear a voice whispering in your mind, *You don't have a chance. This is going to be a lousy day for you. Nothing good ever happens to you. You might as well not even get your hopes up. That way, when you don't get that contract, you won't be too disappointed.*

Don't listen to such lies! God *wants* you to get your hopes up. We can't even have faith without hope. The Bible says, 'Faith is the substance of things hoped for.' And one definition of that sort of hope is 'confident expectancy.' We should get up in the morning confidently expecting the favor of God. Start expecting doors of opportunity to open for you. Expect to excel in your career. Expect to rise above life's challenges.³

Osteen interprets the command "set your mind on the things above" to mean "set your mind on the higher life." In other words, he interprets the 'things above' to be the things of health, wealth, and his emphasis is on prosperity. He suggests that to set your mind on the things above means to set your mind on positive thoughts of earthly success. That is the whole thrust of his interpretation. After all, Colossians 3:2a is the theme verse in his section titled, **Program Your Mind for Success**. This is the way in which he interprets this passage. Notice that his application of this passage flows out of his interpretation of this passage. Since he thinks that 'the things above' refers to 'programming your mind for success' he applies it to your life by suggesting that you should expect prosperity through career advancement. His application (expect earthly prestige, wealth, and advancement) flows out of his interpretation (things above = earthly success).

Now let's take a look at Colossians 3:2a in context. We are going to be looking at Colossians 3:1-3.

1 So if you have been raised with the Messiah, seek what is above, where the Messiah is, seated at the right hand of God. 2 **Set your minds on what is above, not on what is on the earth.** 3 For you have died, and your life is hidden with the Messiah in God.

Do you see Osteen's problem? Because he misinterpreted Colossians 3:2a, his application actually leads his readers to disobey the command of Colossians 3:2.⁴ If Osteen would have read the second part of the passage he would have realized that Paul is contrasting the 'things above' with 'the things that are on this earth.' When Paul says, 'Set your minds on the things above,' he is speaking about setting your minds on the things of the Kingdom of Christ. In other words, Paul is commanding the Colossian believers to set their minds on the Kingdom of Christ and not on the things of this present earthly sphere. When he uses the word '**not**' in the phrase 'not on what is on the earth,' it is clear that Paul is identifying what 'the things above' are by way of contrast—by explaining what it does not refer to.

Paul is actually commanding two things: 1. Set your mind on Christ and His kingdom and 2. Do not set your mind on the things of this earth. Paul sets the things above in direct

³ Joel Osteen, *Your Best Life Now: 7 Steps to Living at your Full Potential* (New York: Warner Faith, 2004), 13-14.

⁴ Osteen's misinterpretation of this passage actually produces an application which produces disobedience also to both Matthew 6:19-34 and 1 John 2:15-16.

contradistinction to the things of this earth. And thus this passage consists of both a positive command (set your mind on the things above) and a negative command (do not set your mind on the things of this earth).

Here's my point; because we interpret 'the things above' to be a reference to the person and Kingdom of Christ, how will we apply it? First of all, we will consider the one who follows Joel Osteen to be in sin. Why? Because if they are following his teaching, they will be setting their mind on the things of this earth. And this is exactly what Paul is commanding us to not do in this passage. How will we apply this passage based upon our interpretation of it? We will seek with all of our might to do the exact opposite of what Joel Osteen taught. We will not preoccupy ourselves with and ground our hope in earthly advancement and success; rather we will seek to store up our treasures in heaven; we will seek to live for the Kingdom of Christ and not for the kingdom of this world; we will seek to live for Jesus and be like Jesus.

Conclusion

Do you see how important interpretation is? Application flows out of interpretation. Interpretation is not something that you can skip if you want any sort of meaningful application. Your application will only be as good as your interpretation. The principle this morning is to focus on interpretation. Application naturally flows out of interpretation. If you focus on interpretation, application will naturally follow. However, if you skip interpretation for the purpose of immediate application, your application will be weak, watered-down, and maybe even unbiblical. I will be discussing this principle of interpretation more next week.