

Fishing Tips Part VII
Luke 15 and Romans-Revelation
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Introduction

This morning we will be continuing our present series on biblical interpretation, making this the seventh 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 Spirit-inspired author. This morning I will be laying forth one new principle of interpretation for us to consider.

Before actually discussing our fifth principle of biblical interpretation I would like to lay out for you the logical flow of where we have come. Thus far we have established two main points: 1. the immediate (as opposed to the ultimate) goal of reading the Bible is interpretation, and that 2. the immediate goal of interpretation is to discover the original intention of the Spirit-inspired author. The question that I will be answering this morning is this; “Ok, now that we know that the immediate goal of reading the Bible is interpretation and that the immediate goal of interpretation is to discover the original intention of the Spirit-inspired author, how do we discover the original intention of the Spirit-inspired author?” This is what biblical interpretation is largely concerned with. What are the tasks and steps that we must take to discover the original intention of the Spirit-inspired author in any given text of Scripture?

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***
- 5. Consider the Genre***

The first step in the process of discovering the original intention of the Spirit-inspired author has to do with knowing what you are dealing with. Before you approach a passage or text, you must first determine what sort of literature it is. The Bible is comprised of all sorts of genres¹ (or types or kinds) of literature. Just as there are many different types of music (genres of music)—country western, rap, classical, heavy metal, acoustic—there are many different types (or genres) of literature. In many ways, the Bible resembles a newspaper; in any given newspaper you will have biography (obituary section), cartoons/humor, non-fiction (all throughout), opinion/letters to the editor, etc. And you will without even realizing it bring different interpretive tools with you as you approach each different section of the newspaper. For

¹ A literary genre is merely a type or kind of literature.

example, you will read the comics much differently than you will read the obituaries. Let me give you a few examples of how much the genre of a certain piece of literature will affect how you go about interpreting it. Consider the following: will you not utilize a different set of interpretive tools when you read a letter from your grandma than you will if you are reading a love poem from your significant other; will you not utilize a different set of interpretive tools when you read a comic strip in the newspaper than when you read the novel *Moby Dick*; will you not utilize a different set of interpretive tools when you read a science fiction novel (like *Star Wars* or the like) than when you read a biographical book on the life of George Washington? You will approach each of these different texts with a different set of interpretive tools, and you will employ each interpretive tool without knowing it. The reason you wouldn't even know it is because you learned the differences in the different literary genres little by little as you grew up.

The Bible is full of various literary genres; Genesis-Deuteronomy is primarily comprised of a mixture of narrative history and judicial law; Joshua-Esther is primarily comprised of narrative history; Job-Malachi is primarily comprised of poetry (wisdom poetry and prophetic poetry); Matthew-Acts is primarily comprised of narrative history/biography, parables, and instruction; Romans-Revelation is comprised of letters which are primarily written with a view to intricate, linear argumentation directed at highly personalized situations, and Revelation is a unique letter in that it was written in the apocalyptic genre.

My only point in this principle of interpretation (*Consider the Genre*) is to suggest to you that you should approach different types of literature differently, with a different set of interpretive tools. Let me give you two examples of how much a genre will affect the way in which you approach/interpret a passage.

Luke 15: Parables

Many people completely miss the mark when it comes to interpreting the parables of Jesus because they do not approach them with an understanding of what a parable essentially is in regard to its primary function. Parables are merely illustrative stories. People oftentimes find themselves approaching the parables of Christ in the same way that they approach the writings of Paul, but this should not be. Parables generally only have one, two, or maybe three points. There are two extremely important facts about parables (that are true of almost all of Jesus' parables) that you must come to see: 1. parables are not built to communicate intricate truth, and 2. parables are primarily meant to bring about a response of action based on simple, yet profound, truth. Parables are not built to communicate complex, intricate truths; and thus they should not be analyzed as if they did communicate complex, intricate truths. In much the same way that a logging truck is not built to go 200 mph around a circular track, parables are not built to communicate complex, intricate truths. Different genres of literature are built to communicate the same truth differently, so that it can both communicate a different kind of truth and so that it might land with a different effect. Some scholars suggest that parables are built to work much like a riddle or a joke; insinuating that the goal of a parable is to feel the impact of the punch line.² The 'punch line' of a parable is generally an element of surprise which throws the reader off guard, demanding from him/her some sort of a radical response.

² In the words of Fee and Stuart. See Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 152-153. Gary Burge has also laid forth an excellent explanation of parables. See Gary M. Burge, *Jesus, The Middle Eastern Storyteller* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009). See also Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1990); Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 291-308; Robert H. Stein, *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1994), 137-150;

If you were to rush in to (for example) the three parables of Luke 15 and dissect them in the same way that you would dissect Romans 3, you would completely miss the point of the parables in Luke 15. I am not going to read all of the parables of Luke 15, but I will read Luke 15:1-3 and then give a brief summary of each of the parables.

Luke 15:1-3; All the tax collectors and sinners were approaching to listen to Him. And the Pharisees and scribes were complaining, ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them!’ So He [Jesus] told them this parable:

Jesus then goes on to tell a string of three parables which confront the Pharisees in their frustration with Jesus because of his eating with tax collectors and sinners. In each of these three parables you find three primary elements: 1. something valuable is lost (a lamb, a coin, a son), 2. that something is found, and 3. a great celebration takes place in response to having found the valuable object. Observe, specifically, this third element from each respective parable:

Luke 15:6-7; ‘Rejoice with me, because I have found my lost sheep! I tell you, in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinners who repents than over 99 righteous people who don’t need to repentance.’

Luke 15:9-10; ‘Rejoice with me, because I have found the silver coin I lost! I tell you, in the same way, there is joy in the presence of God’s angels over one sinner who repents.’

Luke 15:32; ‘We had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’

You see, Jesus was hanging out with those who were deemed as ‘lost’ by the Pharisees; that is, he was hanging out with the tax collectors and sinners. Jesus’ purpose in telling these parables was to demonstrate the fact that God rejoices over finding and saving lost sinners. There is one huge, foundational difference between the first two parables in comparison to the third. When you look at this string of parables you are supposed to be singing that song from Sesame Street:

**One of these things is not like the others,
One of these things just doesn't belong,
Can you tell which thing is not like the others
By the time I finish my song?**

And what is the thing which doesn’t belong in this string of three parables? The response of the lost son’s brother! What is the response at the successful search for the lost sheep? Unhindered, ecstatic rejoicing! What is the response at the successful search for the lost coin? Unhindered, ecstatic rejoicing! What is the response at the successful search for the lost son? A mixture of rejoicing, anger, celebration, and self-righteousness. Do you now get what doesn’t belong? It is found in Luke 15:25-32.

William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction To Biblical Interpretation* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1993), 411-415; J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God’s Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 259-261.

²⁵ "Now his older son was in the field; as he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ So he summoned one of the servants and asked what these things meant. ²⁷ 'Your brother is here,' he told him, 'and your father has slaughtered the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'

²⁸ "Then he became angry and didn't want to go in. So his father came out and pleaded with him. ²⁹ But he replied to his father, 'Look, I have been slaving many years for you, and I have never disobeyed your orders, yet you never gave me a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your assets with prostitutes, you slaughtered the fattened calf for him.'

³¹ " 'Son,' he said to him, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³² But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' "

So Jesus is sitting at a table with a bunch of *lost* sinners and tax collectors rejoicing in what the Father rejoices in, finding and saving such sinners. While the Father and Son are rejoicing and celebrating over finding some lost sinners, the Pharisees are just like older brother in that they are responding in anger and self-righteous indignance. Remember, Jesus tells the Pharisees this string of three parables in response to their rebuking him for hanging out with tax collectors and sinners (see Luke 15:3).

There are two main points to be found in this string of three parables: 1. God rejoices in seeking and saving lost sinners, and 2. the Pharisees, in their haughty quest for righteousness, have come to place where they abhor what God rejoices in. Thus, many have suggested that the main character of the parable of the lost son (otherwise known as the Parable of the Prodigal Son) is not the lost son, but the self-righteous, angry brother. Why? Because this parable comes last in a string of three similar parables that are directed at the Pharisees for their chastising Jesus for hanging out with the 'lost.' What you see in the parables of Luke 15 is celebration, celebration, celebration, and then BAM!, sticking out like a sore thumb, you see a snotty-nosed brat of a son sitting in the corner with a red pouty face and crossed arms in the middle of birthday party angrily muttering, "Where's my cake, where's my party hat, where's my presents, where's my song, where's my glory?"

Jesus, in Luke 15, paints a perfectly beautiful picture of celebration, rejoicing, and dancing, but then *on purpose* dumps a big cup of coffee right on the center of the painting. So that now when you look at the painting all you can say is, "Wouldn't this have been a perfect painting if Jesus just wouldn't have spilled that coffee on it? Everything was going so well—everything was lining up perfectly for a happy ending—but as he was hanging it on the wall he had ruin it by spilling coffee on it. The angry brother sticks out like a sore thumb—the spot light is on him and the fact that his self-righteousness is keeping him from rejoicing in what God rejoices in.

This is the main point of this string of parables. And because this is a string of parables, you are not supposed to force theological significance into every verse and clause in each parable. Why? Because parables are a unique way of communicating truth. A parable is a genre of literature, and the purpose of a parable is not to communicate complex truth, but rather to make one (or two or three) sharp, stinging points. Thus, when you approach Luke 15, because it is a parable, you will approach it in a much different way than you would Jesus' discussion/discourse/disagreement with the Pharisees in John 8. And why? Because Luke 15 is

comprised of parables while John 8 is the recounting of an intricate theological controversy. You will come to each text with a different set of interpretative tools because each text is cast in a different type of literature.

I don't know if you could believe it or not, but if I were to preach a series through Luke, I would only spend 1 week on Luke 15.³ And why? Because it is a unique type (or genre) of literature. To spend more than a week expounding it would demand more of it than it is capable of giving. In the same way that a crane is not built to drive 200 mph around a track, a parable is not built to contain loads and loads of complex, intricate truth. It is built to carry one, two, or maybe three points, and to do so with the force of an impact (landing in much the same way that a punch line would).

The Letters of the New Testament: Romans-Revelation

Since we are going to be beginning a study through 1 Corinthians here in the next few weeks, it would be a good idea to discuss what 1 Corinthians is in regard to its literary genre. 1 Corinthians is a letter (or some of your translations may refer to it as an 'epistle', which means letter). Much to my surprise, I have discovered that many Christians do not realize what we mean when we refer to the letters of the New Testament as letters.

I hate to be overly simplistic, but I must say that what we mean when we say that the letters of the New Testament are letters is that they are letters. No, seriously... they are letters! In the same way that you may sit down and write a letter to your grandma and send it to her, Paul sat down to write a letter to the church which was in the city of Corinth and Wallah! we have Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. *You see, when you read 1 Corinthians, you are actually reading Paul's mail.* Of course, your letter to your grandma will look and feel quite a bit different than the letters of the New Testament, but they are, nonetheless, the same sort of literature. Paul wrote his letters to struggling churches, and thus his letters were shot through with theology, exhortations, admonitions, biblical encouragements, and the like. However, the letters of the New Testament bear a similar mark of intimacy and transparency to the modern day letters that we send through the mail.

Now you may be asking why this is so important. It will be worth our time to discuss two primary reasons for why it is so important to consider the genre of the New Testament letters before approaching them. First of all, it is important to understand the nature of the NT letters as letters in order to get a feel for the organic, real-life nature of the documents that make up the New Testament. The fact is that Paul's letters were not written like modern day books. R.C. Sproul wrote an excellent book titled, *The Holiness of God*. This book was not written to any specific individual nor to any specific church nor to any specific group of churches; it was written with no specific audience in mind. Because he did not write it with any specific audience in mind, Sproul was not bound by any present extraneous circumstances in such a way where the theological content and pastoral application of his book were forced upon him. Thus, Sproul was free to determine the course, theological content, and feel of his book. This does not make Sproul's book bad; it just isn't what Paul's letters are. Paul's letters and Sproul's theological masterpiece, *The Holiness of God*, are two completely different types of literature.

Paul's letters are not theological articles or books written by some academic in an ivory tower disconnected from the ups and downs of the real world. Paul's letters were written to real churches filled with real people who were going through real church-life problems. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians is written to the church in Corinth. The church in Corinth was broken,

³ If I were to preach a sermon on Luke 15 it would be entitled, "Jesus and the Party Poopers."

on the verge of a complete fall out. Paul wrote this letter out of great concern. Paul planted this church and because he was a traveling apostle/missionary/church planter he could not stay in Corinth for any extended period of time (after the initial planting and establishing of the church, that is). Considering the fact that Paul lived before the day of cell phones, email, the pony express or any other such mail delivery service, he was dependent upon personal messengers to carry messages back and forth between himself and the churches which he planted as he continued his apostolic mission.

Really, Paul was something of a long-distance troubleshooter. Paul would get reports that things were not going well, for example, in the churches of Galatia. As he was wrapped up in his apostolic ministry hundreds of miles away he had to troubleshoot the doctrinal and ecclesiastical situations brewing way far away in the churches of Galatia. Paul was not able to write about whatever he wanted. No, he was too busy troubleshooting problems which were threatening the foundation of the churches which he had planted and established.

I want to challenge you this week to read Galatians twice through. I do not want you to focus your energy on following the argument of Paul as much as just trying to get a feel for the personal and relational dynamic of the letter. Until you read Galatians as it should be read—as a letter—you will miss so much of it. You have to enter into the drama of Galatians. Paul did not write Galatians in a vacuum, disconnected from the ups and downs, joys and struggles of every day life. No! In fact, Paul wrote the Letter to the Galatians in order to speak truth to the heart of real, intense, and heavy spiritual warfare that was literally ripping the Galatian churches, a region of churches which he himself planted and established, apart. False teachers had entered these churches and were undermining the very foundation of the faith, the Gospel of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ *alone*. The foundations of Paul's beloved church were literally crumbling. And, as a spirit-inspired troubleshooter, he sought with much passion and intensity to expose the message and lives of the false teachers and to plead with the true brethren in Galatia to not follow after the false teachers in regard to both their teaching and their living.

I want you to read Galatians in order to get the feel of the letter. Don't get hung up on the complexity of the argument; just get a feel for the relational dynamic of the letter. So many people miss the real, organic nature of the Scriptures because they do not understand the nature of the letters of the New Testament.

Second, the reason why understanding the nature of the letters of the New Testament as letters is important is because it will affect the way you interpret them. It is so easy to mistakenly approach the New Testament letters as if they were theological articles/books, but they are not. Believe it or not, your view of the nature of the New Testament documents will affect the way you interpret them. Because it is easy to forget that the letters of the New Testament are personal letters, many have had the tendency to mis-theologize them. In other words, they have had the tendency to read more theology into the texts of these letters than should be read. The fact is that if you approach Romans as a theological dissertation, you will force a dissertation-esque interpretation of it. If you see Galatians as Paul's theological position paper on the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, as opposed to it being a pastoral, troubleshooting letter to a church which is being thoroughly caught up in the midst of spiritual warfare (albeit centering around the key issue of justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone) you will not force it to answer more theological questions than it is actually willing to answer.

This is why Gordon Fee makes a helpful distinction between *systematic* and *task theology*. He postulates that Paul primarily engages in what he calls 'task theology.' He explains;

“Yet theology is what Paul is doing all the time. But it is seldom the reflective theology of the academy, dealing with how the various matters we believe about God and God’s ways can be put into some kind of coherent whole. Rather, it is what has been called ‘task theology,’ the theologizing that takes place in the marketplace, where belief and the experience of God run head-on into the thought systems, religions, and everyday life of people in the Greco-Roman world at the beginning of the second half of the first century CE. Such ‘task theology’ is the more complex because it takes place in an extremely heterogeneous⁴ environment.”⁵

Paul was not at liberty to simply write whatever he wanted to write; no, he was overseeing too many churches which were being pulled in to many directions to take the liberty to do exploratory research or to write casual/recreational letters of theological instruction. You get the sense that Paul left the normal task of pastoral teaching/leadership up to the pastors of the local churches and only got involved once situations became drastic. This is why I suggest that he was something of a long-distance troubleshooter, or a long-distance firefighter. The New Testament authors didn’t have the time or the liberty to delve into issues which were not directly weighing on the churches to which they were writing.

The letter which I believe is most often mis-theologized is Paul’s Letter to the Romans. Because Romans is much more dense than any other text in the Bible, there is a tendency to approach Romans with an eye to extracting theological truths without taking into consideration the real spiritual battle going on in Rome which necessitated the writing of the letter. It must be observed, however, that Paul wrote Romans ultimately because the church in Rome was being buffeted from within and without. In other words, Paul wrote Romans to the broken church of Rome in order to troubleshoot her theological and unity problems which were tearing her apart. When Christians read Romans as a high-falutin theological discourse as opposed to reading it as passionate personal letter, mistakes will be made. The biggest mistakes will be those which involve forcing Paul to answer questions which he has no interest in answering. In other words, we must understand that the authors of the New Testament have a much more narrow focus than we often allow them to have. When they sat down to write out their letters, they did not have it in mind to write in general about any ol’ theological, pastoral, or ecclesiastical topic; rather, they wrote to and confronted the specific theological, pastoral, and ecclesiastical topics which the churches to which they were writing were struggling with. This does not mean that the letters of the New Testament should not be read theologically, but it does mean that we should let the specific situation being confronted by the writer of the specific text determine what theological questions we should ask of the text.

Conclusion

Thus far we have established that the immediate goal of bible reading is interpretation and that the immediate goal of interpretation is to discover the original intention of the author and that the first step in discovering the original intention of the Spirit-inspired author is to establish what sort of literature you are dealing with. The fact is that your approach to a text will be determined by your knowledge of the genre of the text. Different genres are build to do

⁴ ‘Heterogeneous’ carries the idea of diversity here.

⁵ Gordon D. Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 2.

accomplish different things. Approaching a text with an accurate understanding of what the different genres found in Scripture are meant to do and what they are not meant to do will be of great aid in discovering the original intention of the Spirit-inspired author.

In closing I want to remind you of why this important. We are all called to be ministers of the word of God. In order to be a minister of the word we must grow in our ability to handle the word. Although some of these concepts may seem to be a bit difficult, it is essential that we learn to grow in an ever-increasing ability with the word of God so that we might be able to both feast upon Christ through His word and to minister the word one to another.