

Video Lecture Series

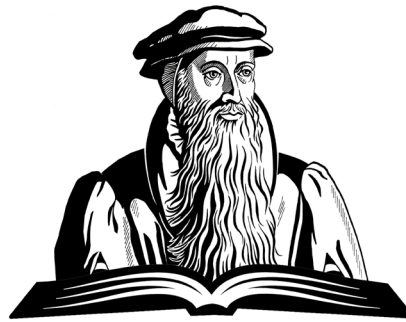
HERMENEUTICS

Principles of Scripture Interpretation

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Lecture 1

INTRODUCTION



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of Higher Education

John Knox Institute of Higher Education

Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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Principles of Scripture Interpretation

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Lecture 1

Introduction

You may know the ancient proverb that says you can give a man a fish, day, after day, after day, or you can teach that same man to catch fish themselves. Similarly, we can open our Bibles and turn from page, to page, to page, explaining to a person what this passage means, and what that passage means, and what another passage teaches, making our way through the whole Bible. But alternatively, we can also teach a person how to interpret and study the Bible for himself. This latter approach provides far more spiritual benefit to a believer.

The lectures in this module are designed to teach a believer how to interpret and study the Bible himself. Paul wrote, in 2 Timothy, chapter 2, and verse 15, “Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” In this passage, our gaze is set on the Lord himself, not the applause or favor of men. We’re to strive to please the Lord, the Master we serve, and to labor in a manner that does not bring shame. But specifically, what labor does Paul have in mind? He speaks of the labor of the labor of rightly dividing the word of truth. The picture of rightly dividing the word, conveys the idea of accurately cutting open the scriptures, or rightly handling the scriptures in a manner that is faithful to God, and faithful to what the scriptures themselves teach.

The purpose of this module is threefold. First, it aims to equip you with Biblical principles for interpreting the scriptures. Lord willing, this will enhance the accuracy of your own understanding of what the Bible teaches, as you read and study, and as you do so privately, or within your families, and in the teaching opportunities you may have in Christ’s church.

Second, this course is designed to be practical, by illustrating how to use the tools with specific texts of scripture. While you must understand the theory, you also need practice in implementing that theory. In these lectures, we will illustrate how the principles we learn can be applied in our study.

Third, this course is designed to be a basic introduction to the principles of interpreting scripture. It’s not a comprehensive or exhaustive course. It will provide you with a foundation upon which you can build in your future studies. The goal is to stay simple and practical, with tangible examples and applications. But you will need to commit yourself to the priority of a lifelong pur-

suit. With the Lord's blessing, by the end of this module, the training you receive should better enable you to rightly divide the word of truth.

In this first lecture, we will simply introduce why this subject is so important, and what the scope of this teaching includes. It's always important to have a reason for doing whatever we are doing. But in this case, it is especially appropriate to have a Biblical accurate reason, given our subject matter, which is, how to understand the Bible accurately. So we will focus in this lecture on the task of Biblical interpretation, and the person executing the task, or the interpreter.

So two things—first of all, the task of Biblical interpretation. Well, we should begin by defining some important terms. When we speak of interpreting scripture, the word “interpreting” or “interpretation” refers to the act of explaining the meaning of a passage of scripture. So when we read the Bible, we ask the question, “What does it say?” But when we interpret the Bible, we ask the question, “What does it mean?” Now you can see both of these points illustrated in Nehemiah, chapter 8, verse 8, which says, “So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly”—that's our first point—“and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading.” So there was both what it says, and what it means.

We should mention two other words that you may come across in your studies, both of which are technical words that are relevant for this course. First, we have the word, “hermeneutics,” which derives from a Greek word meaning “to interpret, or explain.” It refers to the rules or principles for interpreting a particular text. In theology, we often use the word “hermeneutics” to designate the study of the principles of interpreting scripture. So it would be correct, therefore, to say that this module is an introduction to Biblical hermeneutics.

Second, we have the word “exegesis,” which is a narrower word that refers to the application of hermeneutics, or the application of the principles of interpretation to a particular text. The word “exegesis” derives from a Greek word that means “to lead out,” or “to guide out.” It often entails a careful study of the original Hebrew and Greek texts of scripture. But the basic concept is clear enough. To exegete a passage is to draw out the meaning of the text. This would be the opposite of a common error, that is, to read our own meaning into the text. We would call that error “eisegesis” rather than exegesis. Exegesis is taking the meaning that God put in the passage and bringing it out, but on the other side, we're reading our own meaning into the passage, which we should avoid. And so, we have some basic definitions for a couple of important words.

Next, we need to consider the necessity of Biblical interpretation. Why is it important to study the subject? What benefits do we derive? How does it affect our Christian life? Well, the Bible supplies answers to these important questions, and we'll note several of them.

First of all, accurately interpreting scripture is part of the maturity that is required of every Christian. So the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, question #2, provides its answer in the following words: “The word of God, which is contained in the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him.” And so we need to understand the scriptures if we're going to glorify and enjoy God. Paul addresses the Corinthians, in 1 Corinthians 3, verses 1 and 2, saying, “And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ. I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able.” Paul is challenging them. He's saying that they needed to grow up, from drinking spiritual milk, to eating spiritual meat. This entails knowing how to understand more accurately, and to apply more faithfully the word of God. This is made clear elsewhere, in Hebrews, chapter 5, verse 12 to 14: “For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God;

and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat. For every one that useth milk is unskillful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.” You can see, this attributes Christian maturity to having spiritual discernment. Verse 14 describes a believer who, through practice, have their souls trained to distinguish between good and evil. This spiritual discernment, among other things, comes from a deeper understanding of the scriptures.

Secondly, another need arises from the fact that there is false teaching, which we must recognize and avoid. First John 4, verse 1 warns us, “Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world.” And Peter warns of those who twist the scriptures. In 2 Peter 3, verse 16, where he says that the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures. The failure to be grounded in a solid understanding of the truth leads to spiritual vulnerability and instability. In Ephesians 4, verses 14 and 15, we’re told, “That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; but speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ.” We are called to hold fast to the truth, and to defend it against all assaults. Those assaults often come in the form of misinterpreting and misapplying what the scriptures teach. So we need to know how to accurately interpret the scriptures.

Thirdly, this to test everything we hear by the scriptures applies even to the good teaching that we receive. We are to compare what we hear to what we read in the Bible. When we listen to sound, Biblical instruction, good preaching, we are to go back to search the scriptures and to compare what we heard to what the Bible says. And that actually deepens our comprehension. It strengthens our attachment to the truth. In Acts 17, verse 11, the Berean believers are commended for this very reason. We read: “These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.

Fourthly, we need to know how to accurately interpret the scriptures, in order to be of help and service in ministering to others. Apollos benefited from this sort of ministry, we’re told in Acts 18, verse 26, “And he began to speak boldly in the synagogue: whom when Aquila and Priscilla had heard, they took him unto them, and expounded unto him the way of God more perfectly.” Parents also need to know how to interpret the Bible for instructing their own children. Deuteronomy 6, verses 6 and 7 tells us: “And these words”—the word of God—“which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: and thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.” Husbands also need the same for teaching their wives. First Corinthians 14, verse 35 says: “And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church.” And so, if we’re going to be of help to other people, we need to be able to interpret the scriptures accurately ourselves.

Fifthly, we need ability to interpret the scriptures when we come across apparent contradictions between two passages. Now, listen carefully, I say “apparent contradictions,” because there are no real contradictions in God’s word. As we will learn in this course, the principles of interpretation enable us to resolve what at first might be confusing to us. The seventeenth-century English Puritan, John Owen, wrote: “The number is very small of those who diligently, humbly, and conscientiously endeavour to learn the truth from the voice of God in the scriptures, or to grow

wise in the mysteries of the gospel by such ways as wherein alone that wisdom is attainable. And is it any wonder that many wander after vain imaginations of their own or others?"

Well that brings us to our second main point—the person doing the task, that is to say, the interpreter. What are the qualifications and necessary characteristics of the person who is interpreting scripture. The short answer is that we must be true believers who seek the Lord with humble and teachable hearts. First of all, a person must be a genuine believer in order to accurately interpret the scriptures. Well, why would this be the case? Because their minds must be illuminated by the Holy Spirit. First Corinthians 2, verse 14, says: "But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." And so, in Luke 24, verse 45, we hear of Christ's ministry to the two men on the road to Emmaus. It says, "Then opened he their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures." In order to understand the Bible, we need the help of its author, God himself. As we sing in Psalm 36, verse 9, "In thy light shall we see light." John Calvin remarked, "The same Spirit who has spoken through the mouths of prophets must penetrate into our hearts to persuade us that they have faithfully proclaimed what has been divinely commanded."

Secondly, every Christian has the ability, the duty, and the privilege of studying the Bible for themselves. Jesus calls us to search the scriptures, in John 5, verse 39. While the Bible limits the public preaching and teaching of the word to only men—men who are called and ordained by Christ—there is no limit to who can study the word, and no limit on how much they can learn. You'll notice in the Gospels the wide variety of people that listened to the words of our Lord during his earthly ministry. This included men, women, and children. The Lord commends Mary for sitting at his feet and receiving instruction. In Luke 10, verse 42, he says, "But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her." We read of Jesus receiving children to himself and forbidding them not. This continues after his ascension to heaven. Paul tells Timothy, in 2 Timothy 3, verse 15, "And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus."

Thirdly, the believer's heart must be prepared for the study of the word, if he wishes to interpret it accurately. He must have a spiritual appetite, hunger pains to truly know the word. Think of how this is described in the Bible. Job, for example, in Job 23, verse 12, it says, "I have esteemed the words of his mouth more than my necessary food." Jeremiah says, in Jeremiah 15, verse 16, "Thy words were found, and I did eat them; and thy word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart." The same thing with David, in Psalm 19, verse 10 says, "More to be desired are they"—God's word—"than gold, yea, than much fine gold: sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb." Solomon says to search for God's wisdom in his word more than for treasures of gold and silver. If we're going to interpret scripture rightly, we need to come with a heart that's prepared to seek the Lord in that study of his word.

Fourthly, it is necessary to receive the word with faith, if we wish to interpret it rightly, and to understand it properly. Hebrews 11, verse 6 confirms this. It says, "But without faith it is impossible to please him." Hebrews 4, verse 2 speaks of the Israelites in the wilderness and says, "The word...did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in them that heard it." But the Thessalonians, in the New Testament, provide the opposite example. Paul says of them, in 1 Thessalonians 2, verse 13, "When he received the word of God...ye received it as...the word of God...which effectually worketh also in you that believe." We cannot understand the scriptures rightly, without receiving what they say with a heart of faith.

Fifthly, those who interpret the scriptures must do so in humility and obedience. James 1,

verse 21 tells us, “Receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls.” We must submit to, not resist, what the word says to us. Humility affirms that we are foolish, and God is all wise and knows best. And so we need a heart to receive humbly, and to obey whatever his word teaches. If a person comes to the scriptures, and is resistant, they don’t actually want the Bible to say what it really says, or their heart kicks against the implications of what the scripture means, they’re going to be inclined to make it say something else, to make it say something that’s palatable, and something that conforms to their own ideas and desires. So we need humility, we need meekness. But we also need a heart that is set on obedience. James 1, verse 22 says, “But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves.” In Matthew 7, Jesus warns about the difference between the foolish builder and the wise builder. He says that the foolish builder is the one who builds his house on sand, and when the storm comes, the house collapses. He says that’s a picture of the person who refuses to apply or do the word of God. Whereas the wise builder builds his house upon a rock, and the storms come, and the house stands. That’s a picture of a person who is not only a hearer, but also a doer of the word of God. We will fail to accurately interpret scripture if we do not have a mind to obey it. Ezra 7, verse 10 says, “For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments.”

Lastly, all our studies of the word, and all of our pursuits of interpreting the scriptures must be accompanied by much prayer and dependence upon the Lord. Paul knew this. He prayed for other believers, as in Colossians 1, verse 9, saying, “We...do not cease to pray for you, and to desire that ye might be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding.” Well, we learn to pray this for ourselves when we sing, in Psalm 119, things like, “Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law...give me understanding, that I may learn thy commandments,” as we see in verse 18 and verse 73 of that Psalm. We should study the scriptures with the Lord, in the presence of the Lord, looking to the Lord, seeking the Lord’s help. Everything we have already heard reinforces in our minds that we are desperately dependent upon the Lord to help us rightly divide the word of truth. So we must depend upon him from start to finish.

In this lecture, we’ve defined what we mean by Biblical interpretation, and considered why the subject is so important, and what is required of those who seek to understand and interpret the scriptures. In future lectures, we will explore, one by one, the principles God has supplied for accurately interpreting the Holy Scriptures, as well as explaining how we can apply those principles. But first, we must understand something about the nature of the book, the Bible, that we will be interpreting. And so in the next lecture, we will seek to lay a foundation upon which we can build in our subsequent studies.