

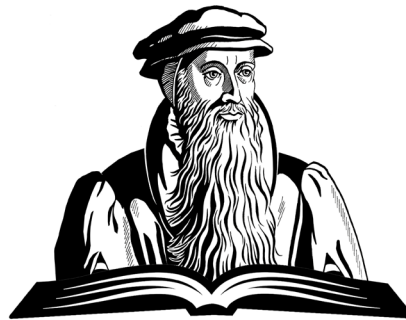
Video Lecture Series

HERMENEUTICS

*Principles of Scripture
Interpretation*

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Lecture 4
COMPARING



The John Knox Institute
of Higher Education

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Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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Principles of Scripture Interpretation

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Lecture 4

Comparing

In the course of a conversation, your friend may say that they are not happy about their job, but what does that mean? Are they unhappy about every aspect of their job? Or are they frustrated with their colleagues, or boss, or pay, or schedule, or something else. You will understand what they mean by everything else you have heard them say, not only in that conversation, but in previous conversations, and against the backdrop of everything else you know about your friend. You will compare their comment about their being unhappy about their job to everything else you have heard and know, in order not to misinterpret what they mean. In doing so, for example, you may understand that they actually like their job—and their boss, and their colleagues, and their pay—but they’re concerned about the upheaval of the renovations in their workspace. The point is that we can understand the meaning of what a person says in part, by comparing that to other things they have said.

Well, this illustrates the principle we’ll be considering in this lecture, the importance of *Comparing one Scripture to the rest of Scripture*. We read in Acts 15, verses 13 to 17, “And after they had held their peace, James answered, saying, Men and brethren, hearken unto me: Simeon hath declared how God at the first did visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name. And to this agree the words of the prophets; as it is written, After this I will return, and will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen down; and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up: that the residue of men might seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called, saith the Lord, who doeth all these things.”

Well, we understand in Acts 15 that a controversy arose in the church as a consequence of the gospel going to the Gentiles. Questions began to emerge about the relationship of the Jews and Gentiles, and regarding what obligations the believing Gentiles may or may not have toward Old Testament Jewish regulations. So the apostles, pastors and elders gathered together the council that met in Jerusalem, to deliberate and decide on what must be done. They wanted to determine God’s will as defined in God’s Word. In the course of the discussion that ensued, you’ll notice how various Biblical arguments are presented. But I would draw your attention specifically to the words of the Apostle James, in verse 15, “And to this agree the words of the prophets; as it is written.”

Notice that he is not only citing Biblical texts, but he is also Comparing one Scripture with other Scriptures in order to understand the meaning, and to establish his point of clarity. He says that the meaning of one passage agrees with the words found in other passages of the prophets. Well, this illustrates for us the principle of Scriptural interpretation that we will be considering in this lecture.

In the last lecture, and in this lecture, we're really considering twin principles of interpretation that are very closely related to each other. In the previous lecture, we learned that there is *only one sense or meaning of any Scripture*, and we saw why that is important to understand. In this fourth lecture, we will consider another Biblical principle, the importance of *Comparing Scripture with Scripture* in our interpretation. You'll notice how this principle builds on and flows from the foundational doctrines that we addressed in the second lecture.

And so we'll begin first of all with the principle. The principle we are considering in this lecture is that *we must always compare Scripture with Scripture* in our interpretation of any Biblical passage. Now this is clearly stated again in *Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 1, paragraph 9, where it says, "The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself; and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly." It says, "The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself." In other words, sacred Scripture is its own interpreter. The meaning of any one passage of Scripture must be understood in light of what we read elsewhere in the Bible as a whole. So the meaning of one passage must always agree with what the Bible says elsewhere. Now this is not the only principle that we will learn, but it does govern all the other rules for interpreting Scripture. Our standard for rightly understanding the Bible is not tradition or new revelation, but Scripture itself. *Comparing Scripture with Scripture* clarifies and strengthens the accuracy of our interpretation.

As I noted, this principle flows from the Biblical truths we learned in the second lecture. The Bible is the inspired Word of God, and it is therefore consistent and coherent. God's revelation in his Word, unfolded over the history of redemption piece, by piece, by piece. And this gives a full-orbed picture, in which every part is mutually related and dependent upon the other parts. They provide one beautiful, harmoniously-connected system of truth.

Theologians also refer to this principle as *the analogy of faith*. So the word "faith" here is referring to the body of doctrine, or the entire system of divine truth, which the Scriptures as a whole teach us—in other words, the Christian faith. An interpretation of any passage must be compared with what we read in the other parts of Scripture. The Bible is one united book, without any conflict between its various parts. So if any interpretation truly contradicts the clear teaching of any other portions of the Bible, then we know it must be ruled out from the beginning. Our understanding of the meaning must agree with the analogy of faith. As we will see in this lecture, some things that are briefly or more obscurely handled in one place will be more fully and clearly explained in other places. Therefore, if we want to learn the true sense of Scripture, we must compare one passage with another. As Paul says, in 1 Corinthians 2, verse 13, "Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual." Simply applied, when there are two possible ways of understanding a passage, with one that is in accord with the rest of Scripture, and with the other in conflict with the analogy of faith, then we must interpret the text in accord with Scripture.

Well, now that we have a grasp of the general principle, we need to open this up in greater detail, and see how to implement it, which brings us to our second point—implementing the principle. As we are *Comparing Scripture with Scripture*, we're going to be faced with an important question:

What method do we use for deciding which passages explain or shed light on other passages? When comparing two passages, which text gets the priority for explaining the other one, rather than the reverse. The answer can be summarized in a single phrase: Always interpret the obscure in light of the clear. In other words, always interpret difficult and more obscure passages by comparing them to simpler and more plain passages. This overarching idea ties together the guidelines that we are about to explore. Truths found in a difficult passage will be set forth more plainly elsewhere in the Bible. If this principle is followed, it will solve many of the misinterpretations within the modern church. So let's consider some examples of how this works, *Interpreting Obscure Passages in Light of the Clear*.

First of all, we should interpret *narratives* in light of *didactic* passages. Let me explain what that means. *Narratives* refers to the historical books of the Bible that recount the unfolding story of Biblical history. So it would include, for example, books, or portions of books in the Old Testament, such as Genesis, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, or, I and II Samuel, I and II Kings, and I and II Chronicles, and so on. All of these contain narrative portions of Scripture. And we find the same in the New Testament, for example, in the four Gospels, and in the book of Acts. These are largely narrative portions of Scripture. They're telling us the story that unfolds in God's redemptive history. So that's what we mean by the *narrative* passages. But we're to interpret the *narratives* in light of the *didactic*. The word *didactic* derives from a Greek word meaning "teaching, instruction, doctrine." So the purpose of didactic books or passages is to teach and explain. So this would include, for example, books or portions of books in the Old Testament, such as the law, and the teaching of the prophets. These are largely given in terms of clear, and systematic instruction. Or, for example, in the New Testament, we have the epistles. The epistles are largely didactic portions of Scripture. And so the didactic portions help shed light on the narrative portions. Now, this does not mean we should pit these two categories against one another. We're simply recognizing that most of the time, the doctrinal portions of Scripture help clarify how we are to understand the narratives. But it's also true, the historical passages can also illustrate and exemplify truths that are clearly taught in the doctrinal sections. So the four Gospels, they tell us what Christ did, and then the epistles tells us the significance, the theological implications of what Christ did, by expounding on it with doctrine, and exhortation, and application. The Old Testament narratives reveal what God did in redemptive history, but then we take God's Word that came through the prophets, and they were speaking at the same time that these narrative stories were unfolding. Their prophetic word tells us why God was doing what he did, and what we're to believe as a result, and the impact that it has upon our life. Well, this may be a slight oversimplification that illustrates the emphasis on didactic passages explaining narrative passages.

So, what are the implications? Well, we need to exercise caution and wisdom in drawing inferences from the records of what happened in redemptive history, both in terms of what people did, and what God did. Now, it could be appropriate to derive or draw out implications from the narrative passages of Scripture. It's especially warranted when it is in harmony with the rest of Scripture. But it can also lead to false conclusions. In the opening of the Bible, we read of God asking Adam a question, in Genesis 3, verse 11, "And he said, Who told thee that thou wast naked? Hast thou eaten of the tree, whereof I commanded thee that thou shouldest not eat?" Well, if someone interpreted this passage to mean that God does not know some things, or that he is not in control of all things, they would be misinterpreting this passage and reaching false conclusions. Why?—because that contradicts what we read in dozens of other didactic passages about God being everywhere at all times, God knowing all things, and God sovereignly controlling all things. This

is an example of building a doctrine on a narrative passage without comparing our interpretation to the clearer didactic passages. And yet, it is a common mistake.

Another example would be basing Christian behavior solely on what Christ did during his earthly ministry. People ask the question, “What would Jesus do in my circumstances?” Well, this can be appropriate in some instances. In other cases, Christ’s actions fulfilled his unique commission from the Father as the God-man, which believers cannot and should not seek to emulate. Believers obviously cannot die as the substitute in the place of God’s people—only Jesus Christ can. But there are other examples as well. Jesus, as Lord of his church, cleansed the temple. But that does not warrant us to do the exact same thing in the exact same way. We could give other examples.

A second category that helps us learn how to implement this principle, is to *interpret the implicit in light of the explicit*. Well, how do we distinguish these two things. Explicit statements refer to what is clearly said. The implicit refers to what is left unsaid, but possibly implied. Explicit statements in Scripture should always inform and control what we might draw implicitly from a passage. Now, interpretations drawn implicitly from texts may be valid, as we saw in our last lecture regarding good and necessary consequences. But they do not stand alone, and do not contradict explicit passages. For example, John 3:16 says, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” The text explicitly states that believers will have eternal life. It does not say, who will and will not believe, or what is needed to believe. Can we draw implications from John 3:16 that conclude all men have a natural ability to believe? or that Christ died for all men indiscriminately?—no, we cannot. Later in the same book, the Lord explains the limits of man’s ability. We read in John 6, “No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him” (verse 44). And later on in that chapter, “Therefore said I unto you, that no man can come unto me, except it were given unto him of my Father” (verse 65). And then you turn to John 10, and Christ teaches that he laid down his life for his own sheep, those whom the Father had given him to redeem. Explicit statements are given the priority in our interpretation.

Consider another example—we read in John 20, verse 19, “Then the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled for fear of the Jews, came Jesus and stood in the midst, and saith unto them, Peace be unto you.” Now, some have drawn implicit conclusions from this passage about the nature of Christ’s resurrected body, that his body was not physical but rather, immaterial, and that it could pass through shut doors, like a ghost or something. But the text does not say that. It says that Jesus came and stood in the midst of them. Now, he may have done a miracle, and had passed through the shut door. But he also may have knocked on the door, and they opened it for him. But in either case, we cannot draw implicitly from this passage that the resurrected body of Christ was not physical. Why?—because, again, dozens of other passages teach explicitly the physical resurrection of Christ’s body. Indeed, a denial of this would undermine the gospel and lead to heretical departures from Biblical orthodoxy.

One more example—Mark 12, verse 25 says, “For when they shall rise from the dead, they neither marry, nor are given in marriage; but are as the angels which are in heaven.” Jesus says explicitly that there will be no marriage in heaven. But we have no warrant to draw from this, as some have wrongly done, the implicit conclusion that there will be no gender distinction between men and women in heaven. Our resurrected bodies will retain the differences between men and women, though the temporary institution of marriage in this world will be set aside, and replaced by the far greater marriage of Christ to his bride.

A third category for learning how to implement this principle teaches us that we are to interpret earlier texts in light of later texts. As we noted earlier in this module, the revelation of God unfolded progressively throughout the history of redemption in the Bible. We move from Adam, to Noah, to Abraham, to Joseph, to Moses, Joshua, David, the prophets, and to the New Testament, the Gospels, and epistles, and so on. In each successive period, the Lord gave more and more light, and a fuller picture of who he is, and what he did for the salvation of his people. The John Knox Institute (johnknoxinstitute.org) has an entire module of thirty lectures that explain this from Genesis to Revelation. In Genesis 3:15, we have the first gospel promise after the fall—the seedling, if you will, of God’s revelation of the covenant of grace. This text is like a little bud. There is much that is unclear about it. But as time progressed, God caused that bud to open up into full bloom, so that we could see more of what it meant, as we read through the Old Testament and into the New Testament. Because later parts of the Bible give greater light to what we read in earlier portions, and latter sections can help us interpret the earlier sections. Now this emphasizes an important point—*You’ll never understand the New Testament well without the Old Testament, and, You’ll never understand the Old Testament well without the New Testament.* The book of Revelation, for example, requires a deep familiarity with the language, symbols, history, themes, doctrines of the Old Testament. I mean, you think the other way—the Book of Psalms shows us more of the depths of Christ’s experience on the cross than even the Gospels do. And so, you cannot understand either the Old or New Testament without the other. The book of Hebrews, for example, opens up and explains the gospel riches that are found in the Old Testament book of Leviticus. If we read that earlier portion, of the book of Leviticus, in light of that latter portion, found in the book of Hebrews, you will get far more out of all that God is saying in the course of the book of Leviticus. In order to see Christ and the gospel in the Old Testament, and to properly interpret the Old Testament, you’ll need to read it in light of its New Testament fulfillment. John 12, verse 41 tells us that Isaiah was beholding Christ, in his famous vision in Isaiah 6. Or in John 3, verse 14, we learn that the brazen serpent that Moses lifted up in the wilderness was a picture of Christ who would be lifted upon the cross to save his people. And we can multiply examples of this. So we interpret earlier portions in light of later portions.

A fourth category is that *we should interpret figurative texts in light of literal texts.* The Bible uses figurative language at times—pictures, symbols, types, apocalyptic language, poetic descriptions, and so on. This figurative language must always be interpreted in light of more literal passages of Scripture. The Bible speaks of God having eyes, ears, hands, arms, and other human attributes. It also speaks of movement, of his coming and going. But we should not conclude, therefore, that God has a physical body like men. Why?—because countless other, more literal passages clearly teach us that God is a spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in his being. The figurative language of human descriptions of God accommodates our creatureliness, and communicates to us truths in a way that we can better comprehend them. When it speaks of God’s eyes being in every place, or the strength of his right arm, it is teaching us that God sees all things, and that God is Almighty, omnipotent, limitless in power. And he’s telling us these things with pictures we can immediately understand. Likewise, our interpretation of the highly symbolic visions of John’s apocalypse in the book of Revelation, for example, can never contradict the clear teachings of Paul’s epistles, which are less symbolic, and hence clearer. But this large subject, the subject of figurative language, actually warrants further consideration, and so we’ll take up this whole topic of how to interpret figurative language later on in this module.

Thirdly, before we conclude, let me leave you with a few practical helps for equipping you to

use this principle of *Comparing Scripture with Scripture*. First of all, you must be engaged in a systematic reading of the Bible. We need a more comprehensive knowledge of what the whole Bible teaches. Paul told the Ephesians elders, in Acts 20, verse 27, “For I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God.” They needed the whole of Scripture. The Bereans, we’re told, searched the Scriptures daily. It was the whole Bible. It may be a temptation for you just to read your favorite parts of the Bible while neglecting other parts, but this will cause spiritual malnutrition for your soul, just like eating only select foods would for your body. For example, as we’ve noted already, you’ll never understand the New Testament well without a thorough knowledge of the Old Testament. The New Testament is building upon the content themes, language, pictures, doctrines, history of the Old Testament, which you’ll never recognize without a systematic study of the whole Bible.

Secondly, if you can obtain a trustworthy book that provides a detailed survey of the Bible, explaining the message and themes of each book of the Bible, that may be a good start for acquainting you with some things you otherwise may not know.

Thirdly, when your reading a difficult passage, always consult other related passages. You’ll need to think about where else in the Bible speaks to these particular points. And look for other parallel texts that trace out these same themes. If you have a Bible with cross-references in the margins, that may be a help for starts. But on this point, you need to make sure that you find true parallels. Every verse or phrase has its own particular context, as we’ll learn the next lecture. The same word or phrase in two or more contexts does not guarantee that they have the same usage or meaning. For example, in Matthew 13:33, Jesus said that the kingdom of heaven is like leaven. But then, three chapters later, in Matthew 16, he speaks again of leaven, and he says that the doctrine of the Pharisees is like leaven. Well, the word “leaven” is used in both places. We would not conclude that because the kingdom of heaven is like leaven—and the kingdom of heaven is a good thing—and the doctrine of the Pharisees is like leaven, that therefore the doctrine of the Pharisees is also a good thing—no, that’s the opposite of what Jesus is saying. The point being made with the word “leaven” is the power that something has to permeate the whole. The kingdom of heaven permeates the whole earth, the doctrine of the Pharisees permeates everything that they believe. So be careful that you have true parallels.

Fourthly, and lastly, the study of systematic theology will greatly aid your ability to compare Scripture with Scripture, because the very method employed in systematic theology involves viewing everything the Bible teaches about a given doctrine, and organizing those truths in a logical and coherent manner.

Well, in these last two lectures, we’ve consider two fundamental principles of interpretation. In the last lecture, we learned that there is *only one Sense or meaning to any Scripture*. In this present lecture, we have explored the principle of *Comparing Scripture to Scripture* as the infallible rule of interpretation. In the next lecture, we’ll consider another principle of interpretation—the important place and use of *Context* in our reading and understanding of the Bible.