

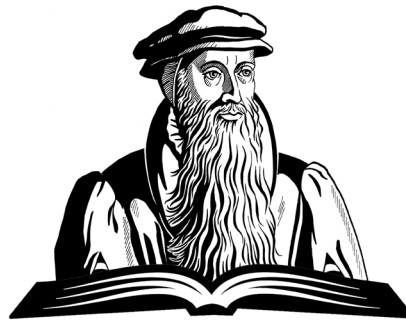
Video Lecture Series

HERMENEUTICS

*Principles of Scripture
Interpretation*

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Lecture 6
WORDS



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of Higher Education

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Principles of Scripture Interpretation

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Lecture 6

Words

Learning a new language introduces you to a new world of words. In some cases, you may need to learn a new alphabet or symbols. You need to learn how they sound, so that you can say them, as well as recognize them when you hear them. You also learn how to read and write them. From the very beginning, you have to start learning vocabulary in your new language, and rules of grammar for how the language functions. Well, this can be daunting, but it is necessary for acquiring proficiency in the language you are trying to learn. But even in your own native language—your mother tongue—words are important. If you scramble the letters or symbols in a word, it will change the meaning of the word. Likewise, in many languages, if you change the order of words in a sentence, you change the meaning of what is being communicated. Language requires us to be careful with words, both how we use them, and how we understand them.

But it is even more important that we pay careful attention to words, when it comes to God's Word, the Bible. Paul writes, in Galatians 3:16, and says, "Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to [thy] seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ." Paul insists that words matter. He argues that Christ is the fulfillment of the promise that God gave to Abraham two thousand years earlier. But he builds his argument on a single word to prove his case—the difference between a singular and a plural noun.

Well, this introduces us to another component in the interpretation of Scripture, what principles guide us in reading and studying a particular portion of Scripture. In examining a given text, we must take into account the words themselves, and the relation of those words to one another. When we speak about studying words and grammar, some people may object and question whether this is really that important. After all, not everyone enjoyed studying language in school. But remember the foundational truths we learned in an earlier lecture—the Bible is the inspired, infallible, inerrant Word of God. Every single syllable is given to us by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, every letter in Scripture has great importance to us. This leads us to the conclusion that we must carefully study *the Words* that God has given to us.

In the last few lectures, we have been narrowing our scope in each lesson. We saw the importance of *Comparing Scripture with Scripture*, that is, considering what the rest of Scripture, or the whole

of Scripture teaches about truths we find in a single passage. Then, we explored the importance of interpreting every Scripture passage in light of its *context*. Well, in this lesson, we learn to further narrow our scope, and to focus carefully on *the specific and syntax of a word or passage*, in order to understand its meaning.

Well, first of all, to begin, it may be helpful to think about what tools could help us in the task we will be considering. The more we read the Bible, and the better we know the whole Bible, the more effective we will be in rightly interpreting the Bible. There are no shortcuts around the need to prayerfully read as much of the Scriptures as we can each day. When reading one passage, this enables us to recall in our minds what we've read elsewhere in other passages. But there are some other basic tools that can assist us. Now, everyone will not have access to all of these tools, but it's good to know about them, in case you're given the opportunity to get them.

First, some Bibles come with cross-references in the margins. So these cross-references are a list of other places in Scripture where similar words or themes in the verse you are reading are used. So when you're reading a verse, you can glance at the margin to see suggestions of other texts that may be related to the verse you are reading. Well, this can be a helpful reminder that points you to where similar words are used elsewhere. There are also separate books published with a compilation of extensive cross-references for every verse in the Bible.

Second, you should know that some modern languages have a Bible concordance. So a concordance is like a dictionary, in that it lists the words used in the Bible in alphabetical order, and provides references for where those words are found in the Scripture. Some Bibles have an abbreviated concordance at the back of the Bible with a list of a select number of words. But larger, more comprehensive concordances are published as separate books. There are also Bible dictionaries. Well, Bible dictionaries give a brief description of words, and people, and places, and so forth, found in the Bible. You also find the publication of study Bibles in some modern languages. These Bibles incorporate notes underneath the text of Scripture, which supply help in understanding the passage. One example, in the Mandarin language, would be the *Matthew Henry Study Bible*, published by Hudson Taylor Ministries. You can also consult commentaries on books of the Bible. So commentaries are books that comment on, or help explain each text of Scripture. They often include insight drawn from the Hebrew and Greek texts that readers may not know. But not all commentaries are theologically sound. So you should look for those written by godly Reformed writers.

Lastly, you probably know that the Old Testament was written originally in the ancient Hebrew language, and the New Testament was written in Greek. Ministers, or other who want to go on to do more advanced study in the Scriptures will want to learn these languages, so that they can read the Bible in the original language. If so, there are Hebrew and Greek lexicons, which, like a dictionary, trace the etymology, and the use and the meaning of the original Hebrew and Greek words. Some modern languages, like English, also have books for those who do not know Hebrew or Greek, but who wish to see where specific Hebrew and Greek words are used in the Bible.

Well, some of this may sound a little overwhelming, and if you do not have access to any of these tools, do not worry. It's good to know about them, but you are able to study without them. It will just require more effort on your part, which in the end, will make you a superior Bible student. John Brown of Haddington, a godly minister from the eighteenth century, grew up very poor, and did not have anything other than his Bible, no other tools. And he became one of the most remarkable Bible students in history. Through diligent study, he created his own cross-references, his own concordance, and Bible dictionary, and a brief commentary, or compilation of

notes gleaned from his studies of the Bible. And he wore out five copies of the Bible in the process. But in the end, he knew his Bible far better than those with many, many tools. He even ended up teaching himself both Greek and Hebrew. We do not have time to give the details in this lecture. My point is that you can master your Bible regardless of your circumstances.

Well next, we need to think a little more about words. We know that the Old Testament was written originally in the ancient Hebrew language, and the New Testament was written in Greek. So our modern Bibles are a translation of the Hebrew and Greek into our own language. So understanding the meaning, and even connotations of the individual Hebrew and Greek words in a Bible passage can be a great help to proper interpretation. The study of the root meaning of words, by tracing the history of their usage and development, is called *etymology*. Studying individual words can have tremendous benefits, as well as several weaknesses. We'll explore both.

The study of words forces us to give attention to detail. You know the difference between the pronoun for the second person singular—we would say, “you,” and the second person plural, we might say, “you all.” The singular refers to one person, whereas the plural refers to two or more people. Well, in Luke 22, verses 31 and 32, Jesus speaks to Peter, and says, we read, “And the Lord said, Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: but I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren.” In the words, “desired to have you”—Satan hath desired to have you—the word “you” is in the plural—it’s referring to all the disciples. But in the words that follow, “I have prayed for thee,” it is in the singular, referring to Jesus praying specifically for Peter. And so you can see how that is a help to us in understanding exactly what is being said, and how we should interpret what is being said in the passage.

Sometimes several Greek words are translated with the same word in our modern languages, whether that is English, or Chinese, or Spanish, or Arabic, or whatever it is. I'll use English for my examples. In the New Testament, there are a few words for “love.” In John 21, verses 15 to 17, Jesus asked Peter a question three times, and Peter responds three times. We read, “So when they had dined, Jesus saith to Simon Peter, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these? He saith unto him. Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, Feed my lambs.” Jesus uses the Greek word *agapaō* for “love.” But when Peter answers, he uses the word *phileō* for “love.” Both translated in English with the same word, “love.” But there are two different Greek words. The third time that Christ asks Peter whether he loves him, he switches to the word Peter was using, the Greek word, *phileō*. Similarly, the Greek words *kosmos*, and *oikoumenē*, and *aiōn* are all translated at times with the English word “world.” And so, you see how there can be various Greek or Hebrew words translated with the same English word.

And there are various words that can have differing connotations, or shades of meaning. In the New Testament, there are ten Greek words for “sin.” In the Old Testament, there are three primary Hebrew words for “sin.” And to give you an idea of how there can be different shades of meaning or connotation, one of those Hebrew words has the connotation of “missing the mark.” Another describes something crooked rather than straight. And the third word for sin carries the idea of crossing a boundary, going over a restriction. Similarly, the New Testament has two Greek words for the word “to know,” the verb “knowing.” One of them emphasizes factual knowledge, while the other stresses experiential knowledge. So this gives you an idea of how various words can have different shades of meaning or connotation.

But then also, different words can have the same or similar meaning. So in 1 Timothy 2, verse 1, we read, “I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of

thanks, be made for all men.” And then, in Colossians 3, verse 16, we read, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.” Well, in both passages, there are a string of words that Paul puts together to make one point. In the 1 Timothy passage, he’s speaking about prayer. He uses several different words to describe prayer, but his point has to do with prayer. And in the Colossians passage, he uses different words to refer to the Book of Psalms. When he says, “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs,” they’re all referring to the inspired Book of Psalms, the songs in the Old Testament. Well in those instances, he is stacking up similar words for the sake of emphasis. So he’s not making fine distinctions and referring to different things. You can appreciate how this helps you in terms of your interpretation. You wouldn’t come to 1 Timothy or the Colossians passage, and begin trying to make these things refer to totally different things. That would scramble the meaning of the passage. But you understand that he’s using emphasis. He’s using similar, synonymous words to drive home his point.

Furthermore, with regards to words, the same word can have various meanings, even in the same context. So I’ll supply again an example in English. The word “trunk” can refer to three different things in English. It can refer to, first of all, a chest to put clothes in. Secondly, it can refer to an elephant’s nose. And thirdly, it can refer to the compartment at the rear of a vehicle. So the context when a person is speaking makes clear which is intended. Sometimes in the Bible, the same word can also be used in both a literal and figurative sense in the same passage. So we read in Ezekiel 44, verses 5 and 6, “And the LORD said unto me, Son of man, mark well, and behold with thine eyes, and hear with thine ears all that I say unto thee concerning all the ordinances of the *house* of the LORD, and all of the laws thereof; and mark well the entering in of the *house*, with every going forth of the sanctuary. And thou shalt say to the rebellious, even to the *house* of Israel, Thus saith the Lord GOD; O ye *house* of Israel, let it suffice you of all your abominations.” Well, the word “house” is being used in the same place for both the literal temple where the ordinances take place—earlier in the passage it’s referring to the literal temple of God in Jerusalem. And it’s used, at the end of that section, it’s used figuratively for a nation. When it says “the house of Israel,” it’s speaking about the nation, not a literal house. And so again, we’re focusing here on the details of words in our proper interpretation of Scripture.

For those who have the opportunity or tools to study the original languages of Hebrew and Greek, we must beware of what can be called *the etymological fallacy*. Remember that etymology refers to the study of the root meaning of a word, which can be helpful. But it is not appropriate to take the whole history of the meaning of a word, and to import all of that meaning back into the text under consideration. Why?—because root meanings can be misleading at times. Again, to give another example from the English language, the word “prevent” originally meant “to go before.” However, the present use of the word means “to hinder, to stop, to restrain.” So if I said today that I prevented the dog from running out the door, it would be wrong to conclude, based on the root meaning, that I ran out the door in front of the dog. No, I, rather, stopped the dog. So the key here is not to misuse the study of root meanings of Bible words. And this is a mistake that you’ll hear Bible teachers and preachers in various contexts, where they try to introduce a root meaning in a way that is inappropriate. The primary focus must be on understanding the usage of a word at the time it was written.

Lastly, Old Testament passages are often quoted in the New Testament. Whenever this happens, go back to the place in the Old Testament, and study what is being said in that passage, to better understand its bearing on the New Testament text. God never takes his own Word out of

context. The New Testament use of the Old Testament trains you on how to understand and use the Scriptures. We'll come back to this point in a future lecture.

But then thirdly, we've spoken about the study of the words used in the Bible, but we must also consider the relation of those individual words, and the relationship that they have to one another in a sentence or paragraph. So, in grammar, this is called *syntax*—the relationship of different words in a sentence or paragraph. Different words have different functions in a sentence. For example, we have the *subject* of a sentence—who is doing the action. Then we have the *verb*—the action itself. And then we have the *object*, or the thing being acted upon. So if we say, “John threw the ball,” then “John” is the subject, “threw” is the verb, and “ball” is the object. So paying attention to syntax can help us rightly interpret Scripture. We will only consider this briefly, in order to give you a sense of how this can be helpful.

First of all, you can ask the question, What words are central in this text?—what words are receiving the focus, or emphasis, or attention in a particular passage? So in John 3, verse 16—a very well-known passage—the Greek text places the words “so loved” at the beginning of the sentence for the sake of emphasis. So we could translate it, “So loved the world, God gave his only begotten Son.” Well this helps us. It helps us understand that the greatness of God's love stands behind the giving of his Son for his people.

Secondly, paying close attention to the verbs also contributes to our proper interpretation of a passage. So, in 1 John 3, verse 9, we read, “Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God.” Well some could conclude that this text teaches that true believers must be sinless, that they are unable of sinning. But before we look at the words, you should know that cannot be the correct interpretation, because you'll recall the principle you learned in a previous lecture, namely, we must *compare Scripture with Scripture*. And you would recall that earlier in this epistle, John stated strongly, in 1 John 1, verses 7 to 9, that those who say they do not sin deceive themselves, call God a liar, and the truth is not in them. Rather, they are to confess their sins and to receive forgiveness. But we can also consider the words themselves, in 1 John 3, verse 9. In the Greek, the tense of the verb conveys the idea of a continuous action, which means that it's saying that a believer does not habitually continue on under the power of sin, like the unbeliever. So it's not teaching that he never commits sin, but that he's not continuing on under the power of sin. And so we're *Comparing Scripture with Scripture*, as well as *looking at the individual words* themselves.

Another example is Ephesians 5, verses 22 to 23. We read, “Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife.” Well, the verb “submit” is a command—it's in the imperative. Whereas husbands are not commanded to be head of their wives, they are told as an inescapable fact that they are the heads of their wives. So the question becomes whether those husbands reflect Christ or not, to their wives, as they ought to do.

Well, much more could be said on this point of the importance of *grammatical syntax*. It is most useful for the more advanced student, who has some training in the original languages. But it's good for you to be familiar with what's possible, in addition to what you can do on your own. Some of the tools we discussed at the beginning of this lecture could supply these insights for those who do not know Hebrew and Greek. To be clear, however, these more technical aspects are not necessary to understand the general flow of most of the Scriptures. They are vital, however, for theological precision.

Well, in this lecture, we have explored the importance of *words* in our interpretation of Scripture. In the next lecture, we are going to consider the idea of *Historical Context*. So we're

coming back to this concept of *Context* that we looked at before, but this time, our focus will be on the *Historical and Cultural Context* in which a passage is written, and how this influences our reading and understanding of the Bible.