

Hermeneutics 101

What is the definition of Hermeneutics?

- **Narrow Sense:**
 - The process of seeking the contemporary relevance of a text.
 - It is **the process of understanding the original meaning of a text in the context of “Here and Now.”**
- **Broader Sense:**
- **The science (principles) and art (task) by which the meaning of the Biblical text is determined.**
 - When we speak of Bible interpretation (hermeneutics) as a science and an art, we mean that as a science, there are rules to be employed, and as an art, those rules are to be observed properly.
- The English word “hermeneutics” comes from the Greek verb “*hermeneuo*” and the noun “*hermeneia*.”
 - Of the 19 times the words *hermeneuo* and *hermeneia* occur in the New Testament, they are more frequently used in the sense of **translating**.
 - In John 1:42, Jesus said to Simon, “You will be called Cephas (which, when ***translated*** is Peter).”
 - The word “*translated*” renders the Greek *hermeneuo*.
 - **In a sense, a translation is an explanation, explaining in one language what is conveyed in another language.**
 - **Thus interpretation involves making clear and intelligible something that was unclear or unknown.**

The first task of the interpreter is called *Exegesis*.

- *Exegesis* defined:
 - **It is the careful, systematic study of the Scripture to discover the original intended meaning of the text in light of it’s historical and literary contexts.**
 - This is basically a **historical** task.
 - One’s goal here is to find out what was the **original intent** of the text.
- Although the word *hermeneutics* ordinarily covers the whole field of biblical interpretation, including *exegesis*, it is also used in the narrower sense of seeking the contemporary relevance of the text.
 - *Exegesis* tells us what the text means.
 - *Hermeneutics*, in it’s narrower sense, helps us understand the original meaning in the context of “here and now.”

Why must we interpret Scripture?

- Why can’t we just open the Word, read what we’re supposed to do, and then do it?
- Why do we have to go to so much effort to understand the text?
- Howard Hendricks in *Living by the Book* writes,
 - “The answer is that time and distance have thrown up **barriers** between us and the Biblical writers, which block our understanding.

- What are those barriers?
 - **Language Barriers**
 - Sometimes there is a difference between the way we understand an English word and the way the translators understood it.
 - Also, it's sometimes hard to convey the tense, voice, and mood of verbs when you translate them into another language.
 - In many instances, therefore, you need to go back to the original language to get the full meaning of a word or the full import of a verb, which in turn can be a valuable tool in understanding the text or a difficult meaning.
 - **Cultural Barriers**
 - The Bible is the product and presentation of cultures that are dramatically different from our own, and also different from each other.
 - To appreciate what is going on in Scripture, we have to reconstruct the cultural context in areas of communication, transportation, trade, agriculture, occupations, religion, perceptions of the time, etc...
 - Rev. 3: Laodicea--Hot/Cold/Lukewarm
 - Great differences exist between the way people in the Western world do things and think and the way people in Bible lands lived and thought.
 - Matthew: Joseph/Mary--betrothed--divorce
 - Therefore, it is important to know the cultures and customs of peoples in Bible times.
 - Often faulty interpretations stem from an ignorance of those customs.
 - **Literary Barriers**
 - The literary genres of the Bible are quite diverse and demand vastly different approaches.
 - The type of literature determines the way you will handle the text.
 - When studying the books of the Bible you should ask:
 - Is it Historical?
 - Is it Biographical?
 - Is it Poetic?
 - Is it Proverbial?
 - Is it Prophetic?
 - Is it an Epistle?
 - Is it a Combination?
 - Literary genre is crucial to interpretation.
 - We can't read the Song of Solomon with the same cold logic that we bring to Romans.
 - We won't get the point of the parables through the same exhaustive word studies that might unlock truths in Galatians.
 - Although each of these genres have much in common, they also have their own peculiar exegetical problems and rules.
- There are other "barriers" as well, but I believe the point is made.

Before people can drive a car they are first required to learn the rules of the road.

- The reason for this is safety, for the driver and also for those on the road.
 - We cannot ignore the laws and drive any way we want to.
 - Failure to follow the rules of the road can be fatal, to us and to others.
 - In the same way, people need to learn the laws of interpretation before they begin interpreting the meaning of a text.
 - Failure to do this can make preachers and teachers dangerous to themselves and to others.
 - Many times people come away with faulty interpretations due to inadequate attention to the principles involved in understanding the Scriptures.
 - Opinions on the meaning of a particular text without proper hermeneutical guidelines can lead to confusion and interpretations that are even in direct conflict.
 - If the Bible can be made to mean anything we want, how can it be a reliable guide?
- Dr. Gordon Fee in Reading the Bible for All It's Worth writes:
 - *Many of the urgent problems in the church today are basically struggles with bridging the hermeneutical gap--with moving from the "then and there" of the original text to the "here and now" of our own life settings...Reading the Bible with an eye only to it's meaning for us can lead to a great deal of nonsense as well as to every imaginable kind of error--because it lacks controls.*
- Dr. Howard Hendricks writes:
 - *If we're to have any hope of interpreting God's Word accurately, we've got to start with a fundamental premise: "meaning" is not **our subjective thoughts** read into the text but **God's objective truth** read out of the text...That's why I like to refer to the step of interpretation as the recreation process. We're attempting to stand in the authors shoes and recreate his experience--to think as he thought, to feel as he felt, and to decide as he decided. We're asking, "What did this mean to him?" before we ever ask, "What does it mean to us?"*
- The aim of good interpretation is simple: to get at the "plain meaning of the text."
 - **The primary task of any teacher or preacher of the Scripture is to explain what the text means.**
 - 2 Timothy 2:15 "Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the Word of Truth."
 - The words "*rightly dividing*" translates the Greek word "*orthotomounta*."
 - This combines two words that mean "*straight*" (*ortho*) and "*cut*" (*tomeo*).
 - Remember, Paul was a tent maker, therefore he may have been using an expression that was tied in with his trade.
 - Every piece would have to be cut correctly so that the whole fit together properly.
 - **This is also true with Biblical interpretation.**
 - **If we don't "cut it" precisely and accurately, then the whole message won't come together and fit like it should.**
 - **If we want to be "approved" by the Father and not be "ashamed" before Him, then we must correctly handle (rightly divide) the Word of Truth.**
- If we do not interpret properly, we may end up applying the Bible incorrectly.
 - Therefore, how we interpret the Word has a direct effect on our conduct and the conduct of others as well.

- The science of Hermeneutics is one of the most important issues that must be addressed in these last days.
 - Failure to do so could very well be dangerous for us individually and corporately.
 - I Timothy 4:1 (NIV) “The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons.”
 - Why? Because they will not have an adequate knowledge of Hermeneutics and how to properly interpret Scripture.
 - As a result, they will not be able to tell the difference between the Truth and the lie.
 - **One of the first interpreters of God’s Word was the Devil in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2:16-17; 3:1-5)**
 - Satan did not deny that God said these words.
 - Rather he twisted them, giving them a meaning they did not have.
 - He also twisted God’s Word with Jesus in the wilderness (Matt. 4).
 - Guess what? He’s still twisting God’s Word today!

There are four basic parts in studying the Bible correctly:

- **Observation:**
 - What do I see?
 - Approach the text as a detective. No detail is unimportant. No stone is left unturned.
 - Every observation is carefully listed for further thought and comparisons.
- **Interpretation:**
 - What does it mean?
 - Bombard the text with questions.
 - What did these details mean to the people to whom they were given?
 - Why did he say this?
 - How will this work?
 - What is the major idea he is seeking to communicate?
- **Correlation:**
 - How does this relate to the rest of what the Bible teaches?
 - Do more than just examine individual passages, find out what the rest of the Bible says on the subject.
 - An accurate understanding of the Bible on any subject takes into account all the Bible says about that subject.
- **Application:**
 - What does it mean to me?
 - This is the goal of the other three steps.
 - The Bible is God speaking. His Word demands a response!
 - Observation and interpretation without application is abortion!

The Rules of Interpretation are divided into four categories:

- **General Principles of Interpretation:**
 - Principles that deal with the overall subject of interpretation
 - They are universal.

- **Grammatical Principles of Interpretation:**
 - Principles that deal with the text itself.
 - They lay down the ground rules for understanding the words and sentences in the passage under study.
- **Historical Principles of Interpretation:**
 - We need to reconstruct the cultural context in areas of communication, transportation, trade, agriculture, occupations, religion, perceptions of the time, etc...
 - Your objective is to place yourself into the setting at the time the book was written and feel with the people involved.
- **Theological Principles of Interpretation:**
 - Principles that deal with the formation of Christian doctrine.

General Principles of Interpretation

Rule #1: Work from the assumption that the Bible is authoritative.

- The Christian submits either consciously or subconsciously to one of the following as his ultimate authority:
- **Tradition**
 - What we believe is based upon what we have traditionally been taught.
 - In many cases, the traditions of men make the Word of God of no effect.
- **Reason**
 - What the human mind cannot accept as reasonable is rejected.
 - The conclusion the mind draws is the final court of appeal.
 - Example: The virgin birth, the parting of the Red Sea, Tongues.
- **The Scriptures**
 - We believe in the virgin birth because the Bible teaches it!
- This is not to suggest that there is no validity in each of the three forms of authority, but if tradition, reason, and Scripture differ, which authority is the final arbitrator?

Rule #2: The Bible Interprets Itself; Scripture best explains Scripture.

- In what two ways does much error take place in interpreting Scripture?
 - **Omission**
 - Quoting only that part which suits you while leaving out the rest.
 - Example: Tongues shall cease--1 Cor. 13; Paul--Romans 7.
 - **Addition**
 - Twisting the Scripture by making it say more than it does.
- What points should we remember when interpreting Scripture?
 - **Let the Bible speak for itself.**
 - Don't add to it, nor subtract from it.
 - **Compare Scripture with Scripture**
 - The Bible will interpret itself if studied properly.
 - Example: Isaiah 7:14

- In Hebrew, “virgin” can actually be translated either “young woman” or “virgin.”
- The same verse is quoted by Matthew in reference to the virgin birth of Jesus Christ (Matt. 1:23).
- In Greek, however, the word has only one meaning, “virgin.”
- In other words, Matthew interprets the word for us and we translate Isaiah’s expression as “virgin.”
- **The context is the primary place you will look for the interpretation.**
 - Cross-reference the thought of the verse rather than just a word or a phrase.
 - Tools: Thompson Chain Reference Bible, Nave’s Topical Bible, The Treasury Book of Scripture Knowledge.

Rule #3: Saving Faith and the Holy Spirit are necessary for us to understand and properly interpret the Scriptures.

- 1 Corinthians 2:12-14
 - The unsaved person is spiritually blind (2 Cor. 4:4) and dead (Eph. 2:2).
 - We must study the Bible with a deep sense of dependence on the Holy Spirit, realizing that He is the One who “will guide you into all truth” (Jn. 16:13).
 - Though being a Christian is no guarantee that you will accurately interpret every passage in the Bible, it is foundational for properly understanding spiritual truth.

Rule #4: Interpret personal experience in light of Scripture and not Scripture in light of personal experience.

- Your personal experiences must be taken to the Scriptures and interpreted, never the other way around.
- Though you may learn from personal experience, you do not judge the Bible on the basis of it.
- Don’t allow your experience to dictate your doctrine.

Rule #5: Biblical Examples are authoritative only when supported by a command.

- We are obligated to follow Biblical examples only if it illustrates a Biblical command.
 - In what ways do we not have to imitate Jesus?
 - He wore a robe and sandals.
 - He usually walked everywhere, when He did ride, it was on a donkey.
 - Jesus never married.
 - Does this mean that we should never marry?
 - No!
 - The Bible has a lot to say about the marital relationship, commending it highly, and using it as an illustration of the whole Christ--Church relationship.
 - **Why do we not have to imitate Jesus in these areas?**
 - **They are not supported by a command.**
 - What are some areas in which we should imitate Jesus?

- Love and Compassion.
- Why should we imitate Him in these areas?
 - We are commanded to do so.
 - John 13:34-35
- **The commandments of the Bible are authoritative for all people, but Biblical examples, unless supported by a command are not.**

Rule #6: The primary purpose of the Bible is to change our lives, not increase our knowledge.

- James 1:22
 - The Holy Spirit intends that we who read the Scriptures learn and apply what is taught.
- 2 Timothy 3:16-17
 - All Scripture was given with this mind, that it shape our lives.
- We must be careful to remember two things when seeking to apply “All Scripture”:
 - **Some passages are not to be applied in the same way they were applied at the time they were written.**
 - Lev. 7:1-2
 - Wrong application: Do the same thing the OT priests did, offer an animal sacrifice.
 - Eph. 2:15
 - Jesus “abolished...the law of commandments contained in ordinances.”
 - So how could we apply this passage?
 - By purposing to reflect on how great a price the Savior paid to have every one of our sins forgiven, using the OT sacrificial system as a point of reference.
 - Hebrews 13:15-16
 - “Sacrifice of Praise”
 - Do good and share with others.
 - With such sacrifices God is pleased.
- **When you apply a passage it must be in keeping with correct interpretation.**
 - Every part of the Bible is applicable to you.
 - Correct interpretation, however, is essential before you seek to make application.
 - Failure to do so may lead to unnecessary misunderstanding and heartache.