

High Peaks Bible Fellowship

Basic Bible Interpretation: Applying the Scriptures to Our Lives Today

Introduction

- In previous sessions we have discussed the steps for properly interpreting language, as well as for bridging the time gap, the distance gap, and the culture gap. In the last session we discussed special topics in the interpretation of figures of speech and prophecy.
- This final session will focus on how to handle Bible difficulties, how to understand the systematic unity of the Bible, and how to properly apply the message of the Bible to our lives today.

Dealing with Alleged Contradictions or Difficulties in the Bible

- From our previous studies it is apparent that many Scripture passages are challenging to interpret because of the significant gaps between us and the Bible writers. But we must not assume that difficult passages are impossible to interpret, or that these difficulties mean there are errors in God's Word. This is why we need to remember the first general principle for approaching the Bible that we discussed in our very first class: *Work from the assumption that the Bible is God's only inspired, inerrant, and authoritative revelation to us.*
- In a previous session we discussed the principle that *Scripture interprets Scripture*. Now, when dealing with difficulties in Bible interpretation we need to recognize a related principle: "Scripture cannot contradict Scripture."
- In general, how are Bible difficulties to be handled? "We do *not* grant that a problem is unsolvable and then proceed to interpret the passage as if it were in error. We hold that a *possible* solution is all that is demanded. We do not have to prove that a possible interpretation is the correct solution but simply that there is a reasonable solution to the apparent problem. Since the Bible has proven itself trustworthy through the ages, we hold it innocent until proved guilty. When problems are unresolved, it is not the Bible that is wrong, but rather our understanding of it."¹

Principles for dealing with Difficulties in the Bible²

1. *To say that Scripture is inspired even to the word and that there is no error does not mean that verbal identity is necessary.* It is only necessary that the words convey the truth. For example, notice the differences between Matt 17:14-16, Mark 9:17-18, and Luke 9:38-40. Which of these statements did the man actually make? He may have made all of them, with one gospel writer selecting part of his conversation and another selecting another part. There can be no true meaning without accurate words to convey that meaning. But there may be more than one way to express the same meaning accurately.
2. *One author's purpose may be different from that of another.* For that reason, many details are not relevant to his purpose and so may be left out. The biblical author did not add things that did not take place but, quite legitimately, was selective in what he did record.
3. *Christ said similar things on different occasions.* Not only did He say similar things, He also did similar things. I am confident that if He Himself had not referred to the feeding of the 5,000 and the feeding of the 4,000 as two separate events, some interpreters would have assumed that they were the same event and would have noted a conflict between the two accounts.
4. *The rules for writing history were not the same in the Hebrew/Greek culture of biblical times as they are today.* The natural language of everyday life was used, and there was not often a felt need to have an exact transcription such as we would require for court records today.
5. *New Testament quotations of the Old Testament are not required to be exact.* Most of the quotations are from the common Bible in the time of Christ, a Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament. Often the Old Testament passage is abbreviated or just the thought is conveyed.
6. *The Bible must be considered authoritative where it conflicts with other books of ancient history.* Even from an antibiblical perspective, the Bible is the most accurate historical record of ancient history available. Archaeology has consistently validated biblical records.

The Systematic Unity of the Scriptures

- Since God's Word was revealed to mankind progressively throughout human history, one of our tasks is to take the truths in the biblical record and begin to bring together the teaching about specific truths in a systematic way. In doing this, we must not forget that the most important step in this process is to carefully study each individual passage in its original context to determine the author's intended meaning.
- "All of us are systematic theologians. That is, we have various ideas about God that fit together in one way or another. The poor theologian is one who has an inadequate or limited view of God because he is aware of only some of the elements of revealed truth, or he is one who has a distorted view of God because he lacks an overall biblical perspective. A good theologian, on the other hand, is one who has taken into account all revealed truth about God and has related each part to a consistent whole."³

The Right Attitude for Theological Study

- It is essential that we remember: *God is not as concerned with how much we know as with what we are and how we behave.* When approaching a theological study, we should have an attitude of humility. "But rock-bottom humility -- actually counting everyone else better than oneself (Phil 2:3) -- is not always easy. How is it realized? Humility in regard to Bible doctrine comes as the result of facing certain facts. The sincere Bible student recognizes: (1) revelation is only partial, (2) we are finite, (3) we are fallen, (4) we need an open mind, and (5) we must be willing to obey."⁴
- In God's wisdom He has chosen *not* to reveal some things to mankind (see Deut 29:29; Prov 25:2; 1 Cor 13:12). Even if God *did* fully reveal His thoughts to us, we would not be able to completely comprehend them because we are finite creatures and God is the infinite Creator who is the only One actually able to "think outside the box" of the created order (see Isaiah 55:9).

Principles for Theological Study

- Doctrine should be based on a careful study of each relevant Scripture.
We must remember to practice all of the principles of interpretation that we have learned, and these principles should be applied diligently to every individual Bible passage that contributes to our understanding of a particular doctrine. As always, our goal should be to determine the intended meaning of the author in each case, and we should carefully identify and consider all of the relevant passages. These passages become the "data" on the subject under consideration, and we should organize this data in a way that clearly arranges the various elements of a doctrine into a coherent whole.
- Various Bible passages should be given their appropriate place.
Not all of the biblical materials are of equal weight in formulating sound doctrine. "All data on a given subject should be considered, and that subject should be related to other relevant subjects; however, equal weight should not be given to every text that provides a building block for the doctrine."⁵

Several guidelines can help us carefully evaluate the biblical material:

1. Clear passages must be given preference over obscure passages.
Doctrine should never be established on passages whose meaning is unclear. "If the author's intended meaning is not altogether certain, and interpreters are at odds as to its meaning, the text is not an ideal building block for doctrine. The weight of a doctrine or teaching should rest on the solid foundation of clear teaching."⁶
2. Repeated teachings should be given greater weight.
Teaching that is repeatedly emphasized in the Bible should also be emphasized when it comes to building a system of theology. We should emphasize what Scripture emphasizes. "It is not wise to build an important doctrine on an isolated text, even though it is true that God does not need to speak twice to make His statements authoritative."⁷
3. Direct non-figurative teaching must be given preference.
Passages containing direct teaching are sometimes called "didactic" passages, and they present straightforward instruction. "The structure of Bible doctrine ... should not be built on figurative, poetic, or historical passages, unless that picture language or those historical passages are literally interpreted by Scripture."⁸
4. Progressive revelation that is newer is preferred over earlier revelation.
The nature of God's Word as *revelation in history* means that earlier instructions may be superseded, replaced, or

amplified by later revelation. "That does not mean that an Old Testament teaching may be set aside without New Testament authorization. It does mean, however, that a Christian doctrinal structure must rest squarely on the New Testament and on those Old Testament teachings and passages that underlie and provide the foundation for New Testament teaching."⁹

Applying the Scriptures to Our Lives Today

- There is only one valid *interpretation* of a Scripture passage, but there may be many valid *applications* of the principles contained in a passage. "Texts have only one meaning. The meaning is the author's intended one, but the applications of that meaning may refer to situations which the author, in a different time and culture, never envisioned."¹⁰
- Regarding the application of Bible truth to believers today Roy Zuck said, "Neglecting to apply the Scriptures reduces Bible study to an academic exercise in which we are concerned only for interpretation with little or no regard for its relevance for and impact on our lives. It is wrong to think of the Scriptures as only a sourcebook for information, as a book to be examined merely for the knowledge we can gain from it. Of course knowledge of the contents of the Bible and correct interpretation of it are essential. But more is needed. We must have a responsive heart, a willingness to appropriate the truths of the Scriptures into our own experience."¹¹
- All of the biblical authors wrote for a specific audience in their own historical situation, so how do their words relate to modern-day readers of God's Word? Do their words relate to us in the same way they did to the original audience? If not, then how are we to determine the appropriate application in our culture and time?

Principles for Applying the Bible Today

1. Proper INTERPRETATION is the foundation for proper APPLICATION.
If we do not accurately understand what a passage means, then it is almost certain we will not be able to determine how to apply it correctly to our lives. "Unfortunately, many people go to the Bible for a *blessing* or for guidance for the day, ignoring the interpretive process altogether. In their intense desire to find something devotional or practical, Christians sometimes distort the original meaning of some passage of Scripture. To bypass the purpose and original meaning of the passage, looking for a subjective impression, can lead to serious misuse of the Bible."¹²
2. Determine whether a passage is direct teaching or indirect illustration.
When the passage was originally written, was it *prescriptive* or *descriptive*? *Prescriptive* passages are those that give a command or a "prescription" for human behavior, and they often provide teaching intended for direct application. *Descriptive* passages simply tell what happened at a particular time, often without providing any value judgment as to whether this was good or bad. "When Scripture describes human actions without comment, it should not necessarily be assumed that those actions are approved. When Scripture describes an action of God with respect to human beings in a narrative passage, it should not be assumed that this is the way He will always work in believers' lives at every point in history."¹³
3. Recognize the differences in how God has worked with people throughout human history.
Every Bible reader is aware that at various points in history God dealt with different groups of people in different ways. God's command for Noah to build an ark is certainly not a prescription for behavior today. God's command for Israel to collect manna as food in the wilderness was obviously not intended to apply later in history. Some of God's instructions to people have changed, while others have carried over from one time period to another. For example, the Old Testament command to love your neighbor (Lev 19:18) still applies today (Rom 13:9; Gal 5:14; James 2:8), but only nine of the Ten Commandments were carried over into the New Testament. Some of the Old Testament commandments were completely nullified, such as the prohibition against eating certain foods (Lev 11 vs. Acts 10:9-16) and the requirement for circumcision (Lev 12 vs. Rom 4 and Gal 5 - 6).
4. Determine what is "normative" for today vs. what is limited to the biblical setting.
"Behavior that has a certain meaning in one culture may have a totally different significance in another culture. In American society, for a woman to follow her husband at a distance of fifteen feet, with her head down, would usually indicate a problem in their relationship. In another culture, this same behavior may be considered normal and expected. It may be necessary to change the behavioral expression of a scriptural command in order to translate the principle behind that command from one culture and time to another."¹⁴

It also may be helpful to determine the *reason* for a particular command or practice. If the *reason* for the command is limited to that specific cultural situation, then the command itself may also be limited in application. For example, when Paul said in Romans 15 that the Gentile churches had a duty to contribute to the needs of the church in Jerusalem, the reason for this command was given: "if the Gentiles have shared in their spiritual things, they are indebted to minister to them also in material things" (Rom 15:27). That believers have a duty to share materially

with those who have blessed them spiritually is a reason which crosses all cultural boundaries.

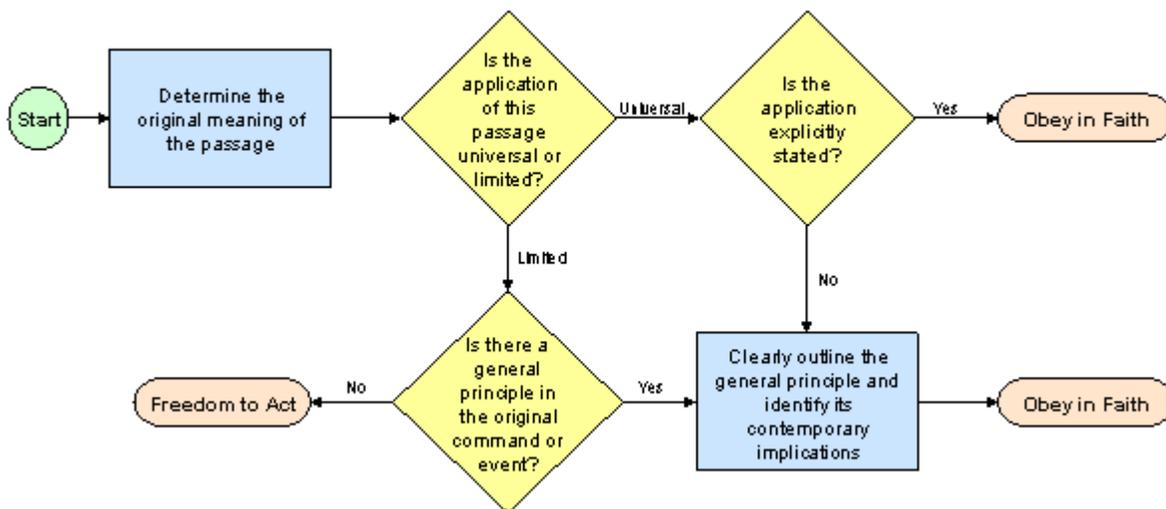
Roy Zuck¹⁵ presents several guidelines for determining which biblical examples, commands, and practices apply today:

- Some situations, commands, or principles are repeatable, continuous, or not revoked, and/or pertain to moral and theological subjects, and/or are repeated elsewhere in Scripture, and therefore are permanent and transferable to us.
- Some situations, commands, or principles pertain to an individual's specific nonrepeatable circumstances, and/or nonmoral or nontheological subjects, and/or have been revoked, and are therefore not transferable to today.
- Some situations or commands pertain to cultural settings that are only partially similar to ours and in which only the principles are transferable.
- Some situations or commands pertain to cultural settings with no similarities but in which the principles are transferable.

5. Determine if a biblical command or practice is consistent with the overall message of the Bible as well as with the unchanging nature and character of God.

"If what happened to someone in Bible times is considered normative for all believers, it must be in harmony with what is taught elsewhere in Scripture. The fact that God used Elijah and Elisha each to raise a young man from death to life (1 Kings 17:17-23; 2 Kings 4:17-37) and used Peter to restore Dorcas to life (Acts 9:36-43) does not mean God intends for believers today to raise others from the dead. This is never indicated in Scripture as normative for all believers. ... Principles, to be valid, must be affirmed elsewhere in Scripture. How does God's sending ravens to feed Elijah during a drought (1 Kings 17:6) apply to us today? Obviously this does not mean God desires to feed Christians by means of birds. Instead the principle is that God sometimes meets human needs by unusual means. The application of this principle is that believers can trust the Lord to supply their needs."¹⁶

Flowchart for Bible Application



Concluding Thoughts

- Every Christian should make it his goal to develop the qualities of balance, humility, and spiritual maturity in order to properly interpret and apply the Scriptures.
- Bible study should not be done simply for its own sake, or merely for increasing your own personal knowledge. Every diligent Bible student has a responsibility to share what has been learned. Ask God to provide an outlet for your Bible study efforts so that you can teach others what God is teaching you !
- Once we are able to correctly interpret the Bible, to see the systematic unity of the Scriptures, and to appropriately apply the Word of God to our lives today -- then we are in a position to develop a truly Biblical Worldview ! A *Biblical Worldview* is equivalent to a personal, practical systematic theology for everyday life.

Resource List for Applying the Scriptures

Ranked in order beginning with the least complicated and least costly resources in each category.

Resources for Applying the Bible Today

1. Basic Bible Interpretation (Chapter 12), Roy Zuck
2. Understanding and Applying the Bible (Chapters 19-20), Robertson McQuilkin
3. Hermeneutics (Chapter 8), Henry Virkler
4. Interpreting the Bible (Chapter 17), A. Berkeley Mickelsen

Resources for Dealing with Bible Difficulties

1. Understanding and Applying the Bible (Chapter 17), Robertson McQuilkin
2. Hard Sayings of the Bible, Kaiser, Davids, Bruce, and Brauch
3. New International Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties, Gleason Archer
4. When Critics Ask: A Popular Handbook on Bible Difficulties, Geisler and Howe
5. Alleged Discrepancies of the Bible, John Haley

Resources for Understanding Systematic Theology

1. Understanding and Applying the Bible (Chapter 16), Robertson McQuilkin
2. A Survey of Bible Doctrine, Charles Ryrie
3. Basic Theology, Charles Ryrie
4. Major Bible Themes, Chafer and Walvoord
5. Lectures in Systematic Theology, Henry Thiessen

Endnotes

- ¹ Robertson McQuilkin, Understanding and Applying the Bible, 242.
- ² Adapted from McQuilkin, 242-247.
- ³ McQuilkin, 220.
- ⁴ McQuilkin, 223-224.
- ⁵ McQuilkin, 232.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ McQuilkin, 233.
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ McQuilkin, 234.
- ¹⁰ Henry Virkler, Hermeneutics, 220.
- ¹¹ Roy Zuck, Basic Bible Interpretation, 279.
- ¹² Zuck, 282.
- ¹³ Virkler, 86.
- ¹⁴ Virkler, 224.
- ¹⁵ Zuck, 92-94.
- ¹⁶ Zuck, 285, 287.

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