

Riverview Baptist Church
Sunday School Lesson Guide
May 17, 2015
“General Principles for Interpreting the Bible”

Memory Verse:

“Give me understanding, so that I may keep your law and obey it with all my heart.” Psalm 119:34

In the past weeks, we have been studying the history of the book we call the Holy Bible. We’ve traced it from inspired authors to Christian scribes and scholars who have copied and preserved it according to God’s will over time. We have explored its styles and composition, what it means and what it doesn’t, and discussed its translation into modern languages so that we can read and know God’s Word.

Now that we have it translated plainly into our own language, the time has come to read it! Is that all though? The act of simply reading it from cover to cover doesn’t help us unless we attempt to understand it and put it to use in our lives. Not only must we attempt to understand it, but we must understand it CORRECTLY. But whose interpretation is correct? Mine or yours? Have you heard questions like that? Have you heard people say “Well, MY Bible tells ME...” as if to dismiss everything but their own opinion about Scripture? How can they be sure? How can we know if they’re interpreting correctly? How can WE know if WE are interpreting correctly? Let’s take a look at some general principles for interpreting the Bible.

Principles for Interpreting the Bible

1) Approach the Bible in Prayer (Psalm 119:5, 10, 12, 17-20, 34-37)

Psalm 119 is a psalm about seeking God’s will from His word. Time and again David asks God to teach, instruct, lead, show, open his eyes, or direct him toward God’s will for his life. This is crucial to our understanding of the Bible. Robert Plummer says “As we approach the Bible, we need to realize that sin affects all of our being – our emotions, wills and rational faculties. We can easily deceive ourselves or be deceived by others. We need the Holy Spirit to instruct and guide us. Thus, prayer is the essential starting point for any study of the Bible.” (p96)

If we are not careful, we can let our pride or shame turn the Bible’s plain talk about anything into something that is at best misguided and at worst heretical or blasphemous. Without the Holy Spirit as our guide, giving us the Mind of Christ to interpret and understand what’s been given to us, we can make an ungodly mess of the Bible, ourselves and our witness to the world.

2) Read the Bible as a book that points to Jesus (2 Tim 3:15)

Remember that the purpose of the Bible is “to make one wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.” (2Tim3:15). Jesus chided the Pharisees for studying scripture so intently and thinking that their knowledge of scripture gave them eternal life, when in fact, the scriptures were all about Jesus... and they didn’t want anything to do with him!

When interpreting scripture, we need to be sure that we read it as a part of a larger, completed whole. Not every verse points directly to Jesus, but every verse within the context of its chapter and in its book is part of the big story, the big plan that leads from sin to salvation.

For example: if you're reading in the books of the Law (Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy) read it with the understanding that New Testament scripture brings. Don't let a study of the Jewish law make you more rigid and legalistic, but in light of Jesus' fulfillment of the law and the lack of any condemnation for sin for those who are in Christ Jesus, see the law for what it was and is, and illustration of how impossible it was for us to live without sin on our own and let that magnify your thankfulness for the grace it takes for God to forgive us and the sacrifice that Jesus made to reconcile us to God.

3) **Let Scripture interpret Scripture**

"If we believe that all the Bible is inspired by God and thus non-contradictory, passages of Scripture that are less clear should be interpreted with reference to those that are more transparent in their meaning." (Plummer, p.97) This guideline has been used by the Church all the way back to Augustine and Irenaeus, over 1800 years ago! Many times cults or heretical groups will take a few obscure references and give them a meaning that contradicts other, plainer scripture, and use it to confuse or pervert the rest of Scripture (for example, Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons use this method to endorse their own heretical beliefs, even though the Bible plainly contradicts their beliefs elsewhere.)

4) **Meditate on the Bible**

In our study on Christian Disciplines, we went over Bible Meditation as an exercise in expanding our minds and absorbing what the Bible has for us. Instead of reading a whole book or chapter, start with prayer and "quiet, sustained reflection on a small portion of Scripture". The more we memorize and internalize the words and meanings of scripture, the more we will learn about God and the better we will be able to understand and interpret his word. This process builds like a muscle, like a feedback loop, it increases the more we use it. At first it may seem difficult or even impossible, but the more we pray and read and reflect, the easier it will become. The more we meditate upon God's word the harder it will become to stray from it and its true meaning.

5) **Approach the Bible in Faith and Obedience (James 1:22-25)**

"The Bible is not a philosophy textbook to be debated; it is a revelation from God to be believed and obeyed." (Plummer, p.99) We can't read the Bible like a self-help book or a trendy new diet/workout book to try. We have to be not just hearers, but doers of the Word. If we only hear it, then we are self-deceived (James 1:22). If we are going to truly interpret the Bible correctly, then we have to be sure that we are aligned with God: we have to agree with what He says and DO what He says. Otherwise, if we are flippant about obedience, we can just as easily be inclined to try to make scripture mean what WE want it to, to support our own lifestyle and choices. When we begin to try to minimize or even condone our own sin, we can know for sure that we are not interpreting scripture correctly because we have allowed sin to corrupt our view of God and His Word.

6) Take note of the Bible genre you are reading

Bible Genres (john-ruhs) are simply the type of writing in the book of the Bible that you're studying. Some books are more poetic than literal in their description. [I'm willing to bet that the author of Song of Solomon was not in love with a woman whose neck was made out of elephant tusks (ivory), whose eyes were water puddles (pools in Heshbon) and whose nose was over 30 feet tall (the tower of Lebanon, overlooking Damascus)! (Song of Solomon 7:4).] All absurdity aside, remember what you're reading. "Proverbs are wise advice, not fail-proof promises." Proverbs 10:4 says "Lazy hands make a man poor, but diligent hands bring wealth." I'm sure we all know some people who work hard all their lives and don't get "wealthy" and we probably know a few lazy rich people, at least on TV. The point is that working hard is generally the wisest way to try to prosper, while very rarely will being lazy get you anything but poverty. Also, historical narratives in the Bible will often report terrible things that pagans or even God's people did in the Old Testament. Just because great evils are recorded as history in the Bible does not mean that the Bible condones or promotes these actions. Histories are intended to tell the entire story, the good, bad and ugly, of God's people: their triumphs and obedience and their failures and sins. So always remember the genre of the book you're reading before you interpret its meaning and how it applies to you.

7) Be aware of historical or cultural background issues

The historical and cultural context of the New Testament (particularly the Gospels) was a Jewish religious context. Jesus' life and actions corresponded with Jewish religious life: he went to synagogue, he celebrated Jewish holidays and had feasts and went to the Temple during Passover. Understanding the history and culture of the Jews (and also the Romans and even the Old Testament pagan nations like Babylon and Assyria) can help us to understand different aspects of scripture (e.g. How Paul's Roman citizenship protected him, What the Babylonian civilization was like that Daniel and Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were forced to integrate into, etc.)

"The study of ancient Near Eastern culture, while fascinating in its own right, is not the purpose of a Bible study." So, don't get distracted by this historical study and don't forsake Bible study on its account. Learning about such things can greatly increase your understanding of the situations that confronted many Bible saints and heroes, but it shouldn't eclipse or replace your study of the Word itself.

8) Pay attention to context

"It has often been said, "A text without a context is a pretext," meaning that a preacher will be inclined to infuse a text with his own biases if he does not allow the context to direct him to the authorial intent." Have you ever experienced this? I'll bet you have. One of the most egregious uses of bad interpretation and taking something out of context in the modern world comes from twisting the words of Jesus himself: "Judge not, that ye be not judged." Matt 7:1. People have and will continue to use this as a defense against anyone's rebuke against their sin. In order to absolve themselves or at least turn a discussion of sin back on another person, they will ignore all the context of Jesus' words and try to make "Judge not" mean to "suspend all judgement about right and wrong so that you don't hurt anybody's feelings!" Jesus is NOT saying "don't

mention sin because it might hurt somebody's feelings. He's also not saying that we have to be perfect in order to rebuke or correct others in love. Jesus is giving a solemn warning against hypocrisy, particularly that of similarity to the Pharisees. Being sinful does not disqualify us from trying to correct others, but knowingly hanging on to our own sin while demanding that others do differently is a serious offense and worthy of judgement from God!

This is just one example where one can take a verse, or just a phrase from a verse and build a perverted interpretation from it. (Imagine a world where a preacher could not preach against sin without some knucklehead shouting: "Judge Not! Nyah-nyah!") There have been many instances where verses taken out of context have split churches, families and even taken lives. Some misinterpreted prophecies have caused churches to focus more on the price of oil or the State of Israel than on Jesus Christ and the Gospel. So we must be careful to maintain awareness of scriptural context and always prioritize that which God's Word plainly tells us to.

9) **Read the Bible in community**

Finally, we must read the Bible in community. This doesn't mean that we can only read the Bible with 2 or 3 other Christians around. It means we must seek wisdom and counsel from other older, wiser Christians when it comes to interpreting the Bible, especially unclear or difficult passages. It helps us gain insights that we never would have encountered alone. It helps keep us humble, rather than only respecting or accepting our own interpretations. It gives us an opportunity to get feedback and guidance on our scriptural understanding. Remember that none of us is inerrant in our interpretations, but the Scripture IS inerrant, so any tool we can find to help us arrive at that Godly, inerrant meaning is one we should humbly take advantage of, especially our brothers and sisters in the body of Christ.

In closing, remember:

None of us is perfect and therefore we will sometimes make mistakes in the way we interpret God's word. However, this should never be used as an excuse to keep us from continuing to train our minds to be like the Mind of Christ, rightly understanding and applying the truth He gives us through scripture. Also, we should be faithful with what he gives us, never too stubborn or prideful to expand our minds and beliefs when confronted with new **Scriptural** knowledge. Many wrong interpretations will come and go. Some will stick to them based on emotion, tradition and even personal sin. We should endeavor to always be humble, introspective and aware of our own sins and ready to confess and repent. Pray to God to for the humility to always seek the Truth and the boldness to hang on to the Truth we've been given, and the wisdom to see the Truth when He reveals it to us.