

Hermeneutics 101 - A Crash Course

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[0:00] We're looking today at how do we discover Bible truths and make sense of them. How can we know what the Bible means? The technical term is hermeneutics, which is a word which means using method or principle to interpret God's word.

It lays out some principles about how to understand and apply the Bible to our lives. Paul tells Timothy in 2 Timothy 2 verse 15, Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.

Hermeneutics is a science and an art. It's a science because it is guided by principles and rules within a system.

And it is an art because there's a skill in applying these rules. When we approach the Bible, it's good to be aware that we are separated from the Bible by various gaps.

For example, there's a time gap. We are separated by thousands of years from the time of the biblical events. So we need to be aware of the historical context.

[1:12] As time passes, of course, culture changes, points of view change and language changes. Another gap is a space gap. We're many miles removed from where these events took place.

There's a customs gap. Of course, Bible manners and customs are different from what we know today. The culture of the day, the way the people lived back then was different.

We've got to take that into account. There's a language gap. Of course, the Bible was originally written in other languages. Hebrew, Greek, Aramaic.

There is also a spiritual gap. There's that supernatural dimension that we have to be mindful. Of course, it's a spiritual book. When we look to interpret the Bible, we need to try to catch a few things.

Firstly, the author's intent. What did it mean? Then. Also, the theological truth. What are the timeless truths that are being taught? And consider what are the principles for today?

[2:18] In other words, contextualize it. How do we make application of it? How does it apply to us? To help us to comprehend the Bible, there's some personal spiritual preparation. We need to make as well.

Of course, firstly, to truly take in the message of the Bible, we need to be born again. An unsaved person is described as spiritually blind and dead.

1 Corinthians 2.14 says, But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness unto him, neither can he know them.

Because they are spiritually discerned. 2 Corinthians 3.14 says, Also, we need to have reverence for an interest in God and his word. And a prayerful attitude and humility.

Of course, we need a willingness to obey and put into practice what we have learnt. And we have to depend upon the Holy Spirit for his guidance. So, there's various qualifications of an interpreter that we could list.

[3:22] For example, there is, of course, faith. Hebrews 11.6 says, But without faith it is impossible to please him. For he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.

We also need a love for the truth. 2 Thessalonians 2.10 says, Let's also approach the word of God with an honest, searching heart, and value the truth.

It says, Proverbs 23.23, Buy the truth and sell it not. Also, wisdom and instruction and understanding.

We need humility and also common sense as well. And let's have a real willingness to study as it reads in Acts 17.11. It says, May God grant us a spiritual purity as well.

The Bible in Titus 1.15 contrasts God's people with those who are not, who it describes as defiled and unbelieving. It says of them that their mind and conscience is defiled.

[4:47] May we also have a willingness to listen to God. The Bible warns of those who will not endure sound doctrine. In 2 Timothy 4.3-4, it says that they shall turn away their ears from the truth and shall be turned unto fables.

Here's another way of putting it. Read the Bible reverently, prayerfully, collectively, humbly, carefully, Christologically, obediently, and regularly.

As far as Christologically, in other words, everything in the Bible does point to the Lord Jesus. And as far as reading it humbly, in other words, draw out from the text, which is what is called exegesis. Draw out from the text by studying it rather than reading into the text, which is called eisegesis, as in trying to find what backs up our doctrine and going searching for the Bible text that backed that up rather than the other way around, that our doctrine and beliefs come from the text.

And be humble enough to change your interpretation. Be teachable, essentially, too. It's good to look first for the literal sense.

[6:03] As it's been put, when the plain sense of the scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense. Take it as read. Now let's look at some principles then that we can apply.

There are various principles people have come up with, with various lists of them. We'll look at a list of ten principles for interpreting the Bible. Firstly, principle one, the Bible is without error, and it is our only trustworthy guide for faith and life.

Because the Bible is the inspired word of God, it is without error. It's also the final authority for what we should believe and how we should live. 2 Timothy 3.16 reads, All scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.

John 10.35 says, In part, the scripture cannot be broken. In other words, it's reliable. We can trust it. It's sure and certain. The scriptures are, Inerrant.

Psalms 19.7 The law of the Lord is perfect, Converting the soul. The testimony of the Lord is sure, Making wise the simple. It's also authoritative.

[7:20] 1 Thessalonians 2.13 In part, when you received the word of God, which he heard of us, You received it not as the word of men, But as it is in truth, The word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe.

The word of God also is powerful. Hebrews 4.12 For the word of God is quick and powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discernment of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

It's powerful, the word of God. The word of God also is sufficient. In other words, it's enough for us to have this word, to know what we are to believe. 2 Timothy 3.17 says, That the man of God may be perfect, truly furnished unto all good works.

It's complete. We can be thoroughly furnished, thoroughly equipped by the word of God, for all that we do for God. We also uphold the supremacy of scripture, that the Bible is supreme.

It's supreme over tradition, traditions of men. It's supreme over human philosophies. It's supreme over human reason. And supreme over so-called knowledge.

[8:33] So, on to the second principle. Principle 2. The Bible is its own best interpreter. Since the Bible has only one primary author, who is the Holy Spirit, each part of the Bible is consistent with every other part.

We should therefore interpret every passage in the Bible in the light of other biblical passages on the same subject. So, this is called the cross-reference principle, that scripture interprets scripture. Another aspect here is that context is king, as someone has described it. In other words, allow the context to rule. The immediate passage, the chapter, the book.

There's various circles of context, really, such as the immediately preceding and following verses. The entire book or letter of the passage.

All the books written by that given writer. And really the entire Bible. So, there's that context principle. Understand the immediate context. What is the immediate context or setting in which these words are being spoken or written?

[9:42] Understand the historical context. By asking yourselves the five pertinent questions. Who is speaking? To whom is it being said? From where? When it is being written?

And why it is being written? Also, consider the scriptural context. Take a concordance and look for other places in the Bible where similar passages or verses are mentioned.

And get a picture of what the rest of the scripture has to say about the passage. Clear passages must interpret the less clear. The Bible is the most important. So, though we can learn much about the Bible from studying other books and by listening to Godly pastors and teachers, the Bible says, our best aid to understanding the Bible will always be the Bible itself.

Matthew 5, verse 18, our Lord says, For, Verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass one jot or one tittle, shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.

So, a jot, a tittle are these minute parts of the Hebrew alphabet. So, not even these small components of language will be lost.

[10:51] The Lord is saying that his word will last and will not be corrupted. John 17, 17, our Lord says, Sanctify them through thy truth.

He says, Thy word is true. Fundamentally, the word of God is the truth. And when we approach the Bible, the wrong question to ask is, as some would try to ask, What does it mean to me?

In other words, making the passage all about me, as if I am the authority. Whereas really, rather, it's better that we ask, How does the author's meaning apply to my life?

So, you start with the author's meaning, with what it's intended to mean, the intent of it. So, the authority does not rest with me, but with the author, who ultimately is God. 2 Peter 1, 19 through 21, it says, We have also a more sure word of prophecy, Where unto ye do well that ye take heed, As unto a light that shineth in a dark place, Until the day dawn and the day star arise in your hearts, Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation.

For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man, But holy men of God spake, as they were moved by the Holy Ghost. So, fundamentally, it's seeking what is the will of God, What is the mind of God being revealed in the passage.

[12:13] Principle 3, the entire Bible is centred around Jesus Christ. Though, of course, not every passage in the Bible refers to our Lord directly, The entire Bible is centred around Him.

The Old Testament foretells and foreshadows His coming in many different ways. And the New Testament tells us about His life, His ministry, and His church which He founded.

Our Lord Jesus is really the very heart and centre of the entire Bible. So, the interpreter must see to it that His interpretation of the text has Christ as its centre.

It teaches Him, and it glorifies Him as Saviour and Lord. Our Lord says in John 5, 39, Search the scriptures, for in them ye think ye have eternal life, And they are they which testify of me.

In Luke 24, 27, we read, Beginning at Moses and all the prophets, He expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning Himself.

[13:18] So, Christ is in all the scriptures. Next, Principle 4, the message of the Bible is redemptive. Though the Bible gives us helpful information on all kinds of subjects, It's not written as a textbook, for example, on history or science or philosophy or psychology.

Its fundamental purpose is to teach us about the God of creation, And His saving work in history through Jesus Christ. By studying the Bible, we may learn how to receive the gift of eternal life through faith in Christ, And how to live that life of gratitude and obedience to God for that gift. Justification by grace through faith in Christ is the main subject of all true biblical and Christian theology. 2 Timothy 3, 15 reads, And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation, Through faith which is in Christ Jesus.

John 20, 31 says, But these, the scriptures, are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, And that believing ye might have life through His name.

Principle 5, the message of the Bible is progressive. So, since the Bible was written over the course of several centuries, It represents a gradual unfolding of God's message to us.

[14:45] The word of God is to be understood from the Old Testament to the New Testament, As someone has put it, as a flower unfolding its petals to the morning sun.

Everything the Bible says from the very beginning is true. But God's later revelation often provides additional information or new insights, Which go far beyond the truths revealed earlier in the Old Testament.

For example, we learn that God is willing to forgive the sins of those who would trust Him and believe. In the New Testament we learn about the tremendous sacrifice of God Himself, That makes that forgiveness possible through the cross.

There is the truth of the harmony of Scripture. In other words, all Scripture is in agreement and will not contradict itself. Another familiar quote, The Old Testament is the New Testament concealed, And the New Testament is the Old Testament revealed.

Also, the Gospels must be interpreted by the Epistles, So that later writing, giving us the understanding for the Church of today, Through the writings of Paul in particular.

[15:56] Hebrews 1 verses 1-2 says, God, who at sundry times and in diverse manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, Hath in these last days spoken unto us by His Son, Whom He appointed heir of all things, By whom also He made the worlds.

There is that unfolding again. Romans 1 verses 1-2, It says Paul writes, Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, Separated unto the Gospel of God, Which he had promised afore by his prophets in the Holy Scriptures.

So, Paul is saying the Gospel is something that is prophesied, It is promised before by the prophets of the Old Testament. Principle 6, The message of the Bible is historical.

The Bible describes what really happened to real people who lived in real places at specific times in history. Of course, much of the material is dated and carefully and precisely so.

The Bible is composed in a specific culture at a particular point in time. And while the principles of Scripture are universal in application, Those truths of the Bible can most fully be realized only when taking the surrounding culture and history into account.

[17:13] It is a sober historical account of what God did and will yet do to redeem the world and bring man back into fellowship with himself. 1 Kings 8, verse 56 reads, Blessed be the Lord which hath given rest unto his people Israel, according to all that he promised.

There hath not failed one word of all his good promise, which he promised by the hand of Moses his servant. Luke 1, verse 1-4 reads, Forasmuch as many have taken in hand to set forth in order a declaration of those things which are most surely believed among us, Even as they delivered them unto us, which from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, It seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, To write unto thee in order, most excellent Theophilus, That thou mightest know the certainty of those things wherein thou hast been instructed.

Luke's talking about the setting in order, the delivering of these eyewitness accounts, To provide that understanding in his writings.

Principle 7, the message of the Bible is understandable. The purpose of the Bible is to reveal, not to hide. And one does not have to have an advanced degree or years of theological study, In order to understand what the Bible is all about.

Its highest wisdom and deepest truths can be learnt and understood, By the simplest believer who studies it prayerfully, Under the leading of the Holy Spirit. So if we approach the Bible with humility, we can receive its truth.

[18:52] It says Psalm 119 verse 130, The entrance of thy words giveth light, it giveth understanding unto the simple. John 14 verse 26 reads, But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, He shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, Whatsoever I have said unto you.

Next, Principle 8. Principle 8 says some biblical truths are beyond our understanding. Though we can readily understand all we need to know for salvation and holy living, There are some things in the Bible which we accept simply by faith.

For example, we will never fully be able to understand everything the Bible reveals about God, His eternal being, His infinite love, His amazing grace, His perfect justice, or His sovereign will.

God's ways will always be higher than our ways, and His thoughts higher than our thoughts. We should never limit God or His ways to our own understanding. As it reads in Isaiah 58 verses 8

through 9, For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts. As it says further in Romans 11, 33, Oh the depths of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!

[20:17] How unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways, past finding out! Principle 9. The message of the Bible is life changing. The Bible was not given primarily so much to inform us, but to transform us.

It was given as God's perfect guidelines for our lives to help us to know what to believe and how to live. If we learn many things about the Bible but we are not changed by it, our study will do us very little good.

We must study in order to learn, and learn in order to live. In other words, the Bible is practical. We apply it to our own lives. 1 Corinthians 13, 2, Paul says, And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing.

We've got to get that practical side right, that reality of knowing God's love, of demonstrating God's love, of that faith in action. Principle 10.

The message of the Bible is personal. Though the Bible reveals to us eternal truths about an infinite God, and His work of creation and redemption, it also speaks to us personally.

[21:38] God is concerned not only about the nations of the world, but also about every individual in the world. That's you and me. 1 Timothy 2, 3-4 says, 2 Peter 3, 9 reads, The Lord is not slack concerning His promise of some men, counts slackness, but is longsuffering to us.

We're not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. So God extends His grace to whosoever will come. The Bible really is God's message to you.

You can approach it to answer the very big questions of life, and you can ask God to show you what it means. You can ask as you read, What am I to believe?

What am I to do? In regards to actions or attitudes, in regards to sin, what am I to do? What do I learn about relationships?

What is the good news for me? How can I put into action what I'm reading in my life? I pray that these principles might help you as you approach the Word of God reverently and spiritually, and take its truths on board in that practical side of life, as you understand the meaning of the author, the Holy Spirit, and what He is saying for you to do, as you make practical application of the truth of it in your own life.

[23:15] May the Lord bless you.