

SUNDAY CLASS: What Do I Do With That Verse – the lens of Culture

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 16 February 2025

Preacher: Gil Balch

[0 : 00] Thank you guys for being here. This is Spanish 101. It's basically a hermeneutics class, how to read the Bible. We're calling it, what do I do with that verse? Even though it's called that, we're not just going to look at one verse. We're going to look at a series of verses.

And this class is designed to look at certain lenses. I think Taylor talked last week about canon, meaning all of scripture. So how does a verse fit into all of scripture?

Today, we're talking about culture. And I just want to pray and we'll jump in. Oh Lord, thank you for your word, for your faithfulness, for giving us eyes to see, ears to hear, a heart to understand, for being a God who wants to reveal himself, and for giving us the capacity to know God, the transcendent God. We thank you for these things.

I pray for our time this morning. This would be an encouragement and in no way a discouragement. Lord, I pray that you would cast those things far from us. We would be better equipped to read our Bibles, to understand who you are, who we are in light of you, and to know and love you better as we get to know your love for us. So, God is afraid in Christ's name. Amen.

As I said before, today we're looking at culture. How does culture affect how we read the Bible? Have you ever had a conversation with someone that may be skeptical about Christianity?

[1 : 53] And when you bring up the Bible, they accuse you of picking and choosing the parts that you like, not really being consistent in believing the Bible. They may say things like, you claim to follow the Bible, but what about eating pork? Why do you eat bacon?

It says not to eat pork in the Old Testament. Or, why doesn't your wife wear a head covering? That's a command in Scripture. Or, yeah, that's a command. Don't you know that that's a command? How can you claim to follow the Bible, but you're not consistent in doing what it says? So, I don't know if you've ever encountered that, or how you would respond.

Why don't our women wear head coverings, as 1 Corinthians 11 seems to command? Or, is the issue of homosexuality merely cultural? And in our modern day, it's more accepted than okay. These are some of the questions that we want to get at today. So, in short, we're asking, how do we know whether certain texts in the Scriptures have a cultural limitation to their application?

Or, if the application of a text is consistent throughout all cultures in all time? How do we know? Essentially, that's the topic of this class. By way of introduction, I think it's important to approach this subject with a few presuppositions in place.

[3 : 11] There's a few things we need to know before we get started. So, first, we're going to ask, is Scripture clear? That's the first question there on your sheet.

I mean, can we know anything of certainty about the Bible? Can we really know what the Bible teaches is true? Isn't God a transcendent God, and so high, and so lofty, and so above us, that we can't really know God's mind and heart?

Are the Scriptures too difficult to understand? So, I think it's first important to say that Scripture is God speaking.

That's what Scripture is. God's desire is to bring people to Himself. He wants to redeem a special people for Himself. It's His heartbeat.

He longs for relationship with His created people. It's an amazing thing. So, as God speaks, He does so in human language. He not only entered the human race as a man, but He entered the human race through language.

[4 : 18] And so, the Bible is God speaking. He has chosen to make it clear. It's not too hard to understand. He can make it clear. Yes, God has transcended it, but He's chosen to make us, allow

us to understand.

Ezra 7.10 says, For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach His statutes and rules in Israel. He had to study it, and he taught others.

2 Timothy 2.7 Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything. The Lord gives us understanding as we study the Lord's law. 2 Timothy 3.16 A very important text.

All Scripture is breathed out by God, and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness. The man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

All Scripture is breathed out by God, including that one. And it's profitable. The Bible is God's Word. It's for you. The Lord is speaking to us.

[5 : 28] If it were too difficult to understand, it wouldn't be profitable. But it's important to know we also interpret the Scriptures just like any other book. There's no mystical methods of interpreting the Bible that's only known by the elite.

And we never learn a form of new, holy reading. We don't bypass letters and words and sentence structure and paragraphs and syntax.

All these things are there. And of course, in another sense, there is no book like the Bible, of course. So, the next question we need to ask, are there limitations? Of course, there's limitations to reading the Scriptures.

We're fallible people. We're limited. God is transcendent. We're sinful. It's possible to misinterpret Scripture. But the conclusion isn't, as some have said, well, nobody can do it.

We just, we don't really know. It's written so long ago. God's so transcendent. We can never really know why even try. That's not, that's the ditch on the other side. We can misinterpret, but we don't want to go so far as to say, eh, we're not even going to attempt it.

[6 : 39] So, it takes work. We'll never understand the Scriptures completely. That's a limitation. It takes effort and study. But we can do it.

2 Peter 3.16. Peter is speaking about Paul's writing. And he says, There are some things in them, his Scriptures, that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures.

I love that. Peter's writing Scripture about Paul's Scripture. And even says that Paul's writing is Scripture, as they do with the other Scriptures, implying that Paul's writing is also Scripture.

And it can be difficult to understand. And the ignorant twist to their own destruction. So, even if there are difficult things to understand, it's important that we place ourselves not above Scripture. We're not the ones judging the Bible. We need to remember that the Bible is above us. We come under its authority. So, I think that's a presupposition that we need to have. That we are under the Scriptures.

[7 : 53] Not above it. Judging it. Now, in regards to Judaism in the first century in America, or Judaism in the first century in America in the 21st century, there are plenty of differences.

There's cultural similarities and differences. There's a lot we could say here. We're removed from each other by eons of time and thousands of miles.

First and foremost, I'd say we're a modern people. And the Bible is insistently anti-modern. They spoke a different language. They were motivated by an honor and shame culture.

They were familial-rooted. Family was very important. But we're an individually-minded people. The ancient kings and shepherds and farmers and fishermen and others who wrote the Bible were culturally very different.

And this, of course, influenced the writing. But it's not as if everything was completely different.

What we see in the Scriptures, so some people say that they're so different from us, but what you see is that the heart of man has not changed.

[8 : 59] You look through the Bible, the heart of man has not changed. Since the fall, we have always needed a Savior. God also has not changed. People have not changed.

And the Lord has not changed. I was thinking, the conversation with people is that modernity is not the problem that we have.

The iPhone or social media or the World Wide Web is not our problem. Sin is our problem. And it's recorded all through Scripture. The Lord also has not changed.

His steadfast love has never diminished one iota. So there are similarities between us and the ancient Jews and Gentiles, by whom and to whom the Scriptures were written. And there's a ton of cultural differences.

But those differences don't stop us from understanding the Scriptures. So how does culture affect how we read the Bible?

[9 : 57] How does our culture affect how we read? And maybe a more pointed question to ask is, does the color of your skin, or the town in which you grew up, or your financial status, or your job, does it help you interpret Scripture?

Does it draw more meaning out of the text? Believe it or not, some say that truth is found not in the words of the text, but in the effect of those words.

In this way, truth is something that's felt or sensed. It's subjective. That's when people ask questions like, what does that mean for you?

What does that mean to you? What does that text mean to you? Or some may say, well, this Scripture means this to me, but another might disagree and say, well, it means this to me. So how do you know?

Are they using cultural biases, their own ideas, to interpret Scripture? If so, that's dangerous. And that way, you're saying it means this to me, this to me, it's different meanings.

[11 : 01] It's just a cultural collective where we stand above God's Word, judging it. But remember, we come under the Lord's Word. And many people interpret the Scriptures because of an experience they had.

We all know people, and we're probably tempted to do it ourselves because of experiences we've had. Maybe a loved one who passed away who didn't know the Lord or a child coming out as homosexual.

We tend to allow experience to determine meaning. So a helpful question to ask when trying to interpret is, what does this text mean apart from me?

Like, if I was never born, if I was never on this planet, this text still has an objective meaning. What is it?

What's that meaning? So, because I was born in East Tennessee and raised here and lived here most of my life in Athens, that does have an effect on me.

[12 : 06] I don't want to be naive about that. It affects how I see life. But I want to be committed to say that I'm not the determining factor of how to interpret God's Word. And often my cultural background can get in the way of interpretation.

So meaning is not found in the reader or the hearer. Meaning is found in the text. That's important to say. So it's also, one more thing, I think we're on the second page now.

I'm going to keep up with you guys. Talking about a couple of things, I think it's good to define some terms. First term, on the top of your second page, says interpretation.

What's interpretation? Basically means, what's the text mean? What does it mean? Every scripture does have an objective meaning. And we can know that meaning. God has revealed himself.

Scripture's made clear. It's not always easy, but it's in the text. Meaning is in the text. The second term is application. application. Basically, what do I do?

[13 : 08] So even though a text has a meaning, many texts have multiple applications. The Lord wants to conform us into the image of Christ, and that can look different from everybody.

So there's, and there's many ways that he wants to get that done. So my goal as a Bible reader is to approach the scriptures to try to accurately understand the meaning and apply it to me.

Apply it to my life. It's hard. It takes work. It takes study. It takes help from the Holy Spirit. We need God to understand God. But we don't give up. Scripture is clear.

So all that is sort of by way of introduction. And I think we could dig in. There's a few ways that we can determine what places in scripture have cultural limitations.

which places transcend culture. So under methods, I want to give you first a rubric to consider, and then kind of three lenses to look at as we approach a text.

[14 : 14] The first little point there is prescriptive versus descriptive. Prescriptive versus descriptive. Basically, as we approach a text, we can ask, does this prescribe something or command?

Or does it merely describe something? And not all descriptions are commands. Let me give you an example. In the book of Acts, the Bible records that Christians continually met in homes.

Acts 12, 12, Peter, it says, Peter went into the house of Mary, the mother of John, whose name was Mark, and where many were gathered together and were praying. Here and in countless other places, especially in Acts, Christians met in homes.

We were breaking bread together, preaching and teaching. The church gathering was in homes. This is a description. Because of this, some have said that we should go back to the book of Acts and begin meeting in homes again.

The early disciples met in homes. It was good for them. We should do that as well. However, I think that's a misconception of how to read our Bible. How we should apply Scripture to our lives.

[15 : 25] Just because they did something doesn't mean it's a prescription for us. How do we know? I'll just look into that with those questions below, but I think there are places in the Bible that, another question to ask is, are there places in the Bible that other places that commend, encourage, or command this practice?

Are there places where it's commanded to meet in homes rather than public buildings? No, I don't think so. I think this is merely descriptive. In fact, if you look at the culture at the time, the disciples were largely persecuted.

And so they couldn't meet in public places. There's a cultural component to their situation that doesn't apply to us today. We aren't being persecuted in the same way and have the ability to meet in public buildings.

So prescription versus description. It's a good rubric to think about. Another instant of description is the many places where Jesus prays in the Gospels.

Luke 5, 15, 16 says, But now even more, the report about him went abroad and great crowds gathered to hear him and to be healed of their infirmities. But he would withdraw to desolate places and pray.

[16 : 41] In so many other places, the Bible reports Jesus praying with his disciples or alone. Again, a description. Does that mean we don't need to pray?

It's only a description? Does it command it in other places? Yes, it's commanded in other places. Think about the Lord's Prayer in Luke.

He's teaching his disciples to pray. So it's also a command. It's not only describing something. Seems kind of basic, but I think prescription versus description is something very helpful to hold. Now let's look down at those lenses to consider. I think these are good lenses. These aren't exhaustive. These aren't the only things to determine whether a command and application is cultural or transcends culture.

But I think this is a good place to start. These are on your sheet. Number one, there are several of these in the New Testament. And it says, number one, to the degree that a stipulation is rooted in creation, to that degree, it has abiding value.

[17 : 48] So if they argue an application or a command that's rooted, the argument is rooted in creation, then it has abiding value. Matthew 19 is one of those examples talking about marriage and divorce.

Jesus says in Matthew 19, Pharisees came up and tested him by asking, is it lawful to divorce one's wife or any cause? And he answered, have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female?

And he said, therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife and the two shall become one flesh. So they're no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate.

He's referring to the Genesis account, right, in the beginning. When God made man and woman, God created the first marriage and he instituted that it should not end in divorce.

Regardless of culture, this is an abiding command that transcends culture. We can't go back and say, that's only for their time. He gave other reasons that divorce was allowed, but he's saying, essentially, that that's not a cultural thing.

[18 : 59] He roots his reason in creation. The second lens is to the degree that a command, that it is commanded across the whole terrain of Scripture, Old Testament, New Testament, epistles, gospels, then it has a high level of abiding validity.

This kind of gets back to what Taylor was saying last week in reading the Scripture in light of canon, all of canon. In other words, if the command or instruction is consistent through Scripture, then we can be certain that that command or application transcends culture.

I'd say one very controversial example is homosexuality. Half of the texts in Scripture that speak of homosexuality come from the Old Testament.

And many said that because it's from the Old Testament and particularly Leviticus, where it's all mixed in with these other food regulations, that it's no longer for modern people. It doesn't apply to us. So the question we need to ask, does the New Testament in any way validate or discredit the Old Testament what the Old Testament says about homosexuality? [20 : 16] Does it validate or discredit? If you think about it, it does not in any way discredit what the Old Testament says. And in fact, it does validate it. Scripture is completely consistent across the whole canon.

And beyond these six verses that are listed on your handout, Scripture has a lot to say about sexual immorality, which includes homosexuality. I've heard a lot of theological gymnastics to try to wiggle those texts to mean something that they don't mean.

And if you look at the full weight of the entire canon, it's pretty clear. The Bible takes a singular position on this. Other examples that we don't see consistency would be things like food regulations. Mark 7, Jesus commands all foods to be clean. Well, that discredits or goes against the Old Testament.

Acts 15 is also a place where they discuss circumcision. And is circumcision necessary to be saved? Is that consistent throughout all of canon?

[21 : 31] No, it's not. In Acts 15, they meet to discuss that various thing, discerning that it is not necessary for salvation. number three, would a literal application of the command accomplish the intended objective of the author's original statement?

It's a mouthful. Basically, does the literal application accomplish the reason that he's writing it? This one can be a little more difficult to determine.

It takes a bit more work and illumination from the Spirit. Here, we have to look closely at the principle that the Lord wants to draw the text. So we're going to spend more time on this one and one particular text.

I'm going to read 1 Corinthians 11, 2 through 16. This deals with a lot of things here, but we're going to focus in on one little section, particularly about head coverings.

1 Corinthians 11 says, Now I command you, because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions as I delivered them to you, but I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God.

[22 : 48] Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covers dishonors his head, but every wife who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, since it is the same as if her head were shaven.

For if a wife will not cover her head, then she should cut her hair short. But since it is disgraceful for a wife to cut her hair or shave her head and let her cover her head, for man ought not to cover his head since he is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man.

For man was not made for woman, but woman for man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. That is why a wife ought to have the symbol of authority on her head because of the angels.

Nevertheless, in the Lord, woman is not independent of man nor man of woman. For as woman was made for man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God.

Judge for yourself. Is it proper for a wife to pray to God with her head uncovered? Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair, it is a disgrace for him? But if a woman has long hair, it is her glory, for her hair is given for her covering.

[23 : 57] If anyone is inclined to be contentious, we have no such practice, nor do the churches of God. A lot of controversy in some ways on these texts.

A lot of trees have been killed writing about this. I'm going to try to draw out the principle, but let me first take a parenthesis and say that there are few texts where it is necessary to understand the culture of the day in order to understand the meaning of the text.

It's always helpful to know the culture that's going on of when this was written, the context, what was happening. It's usually not necessary to draw meaning out of the text.

I think there are a few places where it may be necessary to know what's going on, and I think this is one of those places. So before we draw out meaning, let's look at the culture of this background.

Commentators generally agree this is what was happening at the time. Number one, there's three little points here. I don't think they're on your sheet, but during pagan religious ceremonies, priests, these were Roman men of high status, the priests pulled their togas over their heads when they

prayed or led sacrifices.

[25 : 27] If the socially elite men of Corinth covered their heads when doing religious activities, they would be highlighting their social status. Because this is who did that.

This is what they did. These were the socially elite. So when they did that, they're saying, I am somebody socially. And instead of highlighting Christ, which is the church's head, drawing attention to themselves, they'd be drawing attention to themselves.

So Paul commands these men not to adopt this pagan practice. Number two, the woman's covering her head indicated that she was married. A thin headscarf or head covering symbolized a woman's being married and that she was modest and chastity.

that indicated submission to her husband. This was one way in which the wife honored her husband publicly in this culture. So a wife who refused to cover her head publicly disgraced her husband.

And three, a new kind of wife was emerging during that time in the Roman world. One who rebelled against the culture of their day. It was a culture that allowed men to be sexually promiscuous but not women.

[26 : 41] women. And so these women would try to flaunt their freedom and identify with these sexually promiscuous men in many ways. They'd flaunt this freedom by removing their veils.

It was a terrible problem but not the way to go about solving it. So a Christian wife should not deliberately remove her veil while praying or prophesying during corporate worship because that would contentiously identify her with these promiscuous women.

And the main thrust of Paul's argument is found in verse 4 and 5 and he says when praying or prophesying in church men who cover their heads dishonor Christ and wives who uncover their heads dishonor their husbands.

That's the main thrust of what he's saying. So I think in many ways the principle we can draw most commentators agree is that one should do nothing to distract from the glory of God when in the community of worship.

I think that's a good principle. I think that's borne out by that text and in the culture. One should do nothing to distract from the glory of God when in the community of worship.

[27 : 59] So Henry there's a lot that could be said again but in regards to head coverings I think we've discovered the principle and then we have to ask does the application the literal application of wearing of a woman wearing a head covering a wife wearing a head covering accomplish that purpose today?

Does it accomplish? I would personally argue I don't think so. Does God care that much about the fabric that a woman puts over her head?

or if a man wears a ball cap in church? Is the Lord concerned about those things? I think instead it was actually an outward symbol of a woman who was married honoring her husband and that the man was humble.

I think if a woman wore such a head covering today it might defeat the spirit of the principle and actually draw unwanted attention. So what might be what could be an equal parallel?

What could be a parallel to this? An application that would be culturally relevant? Many have said and I agree is that for men and women to both dress appropriately so as to not draw attention to themselves especially in a way that might culturally align with prostitution or in a way that deliberately highlights opulence or wealth.

[29 : 28] It may even be wearing a wedding ring to publicly show that a woman's married. It doesn't mean you have to wear a wedding ring but the issue here was that they removed their veils to show that they were available and that's what was wrong.

All these might be culturally appropriate ways. So I think you can see that having some historical cultural context does shine light on scripture.

It's not always necessary, meaning is in the text, but it can shed light on the subject. So that being said, in relation to culture, there are two kinds of commands in scripture.

Commands that do transfer from culture to culture with no alteration and commands that embody timeless principles and varying ways of expressing the application from culture to culture.

in the last couple minutes I want to look at a few texts and see if we can categorize a few things and see where they fit. These examples down there, Leviticus 19, 11, do not steal.

[30 : 42] What would you guys say? This is the engagement part. What would you guys, do not steal? Does this have cultural implications? It's limited? Or is this once for all time? Where would

you put that?

Once for all time? I think so. I think different cultures have different meanings of land ownership, right?

But essentially this is a moral transcultural command that's consistent throughout all scripture. Yeah, I think it fits in that category, that number one category that transfers from culture to culture. What about B, Ephesians 5, 18, do not get drunk with wine? Is that one merely cultural or does it transcend all culture? Transfers throughout all culture, all time?

Yeah. In some ways, it's almost a combination of both, maybe. If you think about it, yes, we should not get drunk. I think that's consistent. Part of that's being sober-minded, right?

[31 : 47] The Lord wants us to be sober-minded, be filled with the spirit. But is wine the only thing that we can get drunk from? Doesn't mean we get drunk with vodka. So, yeah, I think, but the believers should also consider what substances could fall into this principle of the original command.

There's broader application, being sober-minded. What about C, 2 Corinthians 13, 13? Greet one another with a holy kiss. Do you want another brother coming up and kissing you on the cheek, Dustin?

Holy kiss. I was struggling with hugs, much less a holy kiss. Holy kiss, yeah. You know where I come from. That's right. Does it merely mean shake hands? Maybe.

I think the principle is something that shows a deep affection, or something physical to it. So maybe a hug, I think I heard Piper or someone say that he had two people, two men who come and kiss him on the cheek whenever they greet him.

There's no implications of anything negative. It's very moving for him, but I think that would be, it does depend on the culture. But the principle is create one another with a way that shows deep affection and meaning.

[33 : 11] So when we greet one another, we want to say, I'm really thankful to see you. It could be that. I mean, there's different ways it could find expression. But yeah, I would say that maybe that one's, we can leave that one behind.

That's where I landed that one. And D, 2 Timothy 4.13, when you come, bring the cloak that I left. That's a command. What does that one fall?

Maybe neither of them. It's like, there's really, I think we can assume that Timothy brought the cloak. There's no more application for us to do. So, that one was for fun.

Last, and probably the most important element in reading the scripture, each hermetic new class should include this element. That is the role of the Holy Spirit. We talked about interpretation and application, finding meaning and applying to our lives, but this is impossible without illumination. Meaning, the illumination of the scriptures from God himself. We need God to help us see our sinfulness and forgiveness and need for forgiveness, but we also need him to give us a willingness to submit to his word and obey.

[34 : 24] We need the Lord to illuminate the scriptures for us. One of the questions in the Sovereign Grace Catechism asks, how can we understand the Bible?

That's a good answer. As the scriptures are preached and read, the Holy Spirit illuminates our minds to understand, cherish, and obey God's word.

So, I hope this class hasn't made you more skeptical in your understanding, but rather encouraged you that you can understand what is written.

Hopefully these tools are a resource. I believe the biggest thing you can do is ask the Holy Spirit to illuminate the scriptures for you. Let me pray. Father, thank you again that you have given us your word.

You have not left us to yourself. You have told us of the redemption story that is still ongoing, Lord. The writing is done, but the process is still happening.

[35 : 27] We will be saved one day. You have saved us. You are saving us, and you will save us, Lord. Thank you for the promise of the consummation of salvation. It is recorded in your word.

Would you give each of us a confidence that we can know you through your word, understand, illuminate the scriptures for us, Lord. I pray that you would help us and give us the willingness to submit and obey.

We pray these things in Christ's name. Amen. Amen. Amen.