

Sermon 5: *“A Matter of Interpretation”*

Text: 2 Timothy 2:1

Introduction:

- A. How many of you enjoyed Jay Leno’s “Headlines” segment on the Tonight Show?
1. Let’s begin with some actual headlines collected from local, national, and international newspapers that are rather ambiguous.
 - a. It’s clear what the writer was trying to say, but in each case there is a humorous interpretation of the headline which illustrates how hard it is to clearly communicate ideas.
 2. Eye Drops Off Shelf – How scary!
 3. Kids Make Nutritious Snacks – Who would have thought?
 4. Dealers Will Hear Car Talk at Noon – I want to hear that!
 5. Milk Drinkers are Turning to Powder – How sad!
 6. Juvenile Court to Try Shooting Defendant – I guess they can try that!
 7. Two Sisters Reunited After 18 Years at Checkout Counter – You talk about a long line!
 8. Red Tape Holds Up New Bridge – Duct Tape has so many uses!
- B. When we turn to the Bible, we realize that communication and interpretation have much more serious implications.
1. As you know, we are in a sermon series about being the church that Jesus built.
 - a. We’ve been talking about striving to be the church of the New Testament.
 - b. We’ve talked about the importance of having both the form and the heart of the NT church.
 2. Last week we talked about the place and purpose of the Bible.
 - a. We talked about how we know that the Bible is God’s Word and the authority it carries.
 3. Let’s return to one of the verses we gave some attention to: 2 Timothy 3:16-17 reads, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”
 4. From that declaration of Paul we learn that all Scripture is inspired by God.
 - a. God breathed into his chosen writers, and Peter tells us that as they wrote, they were carried along by the Holy Spirit (2 Pet. 1:20-21).
 5. A second thing we learn from Paul’s declaration is that Scripture is useful for all the things required in the administration of the Christian faith, so that the person of God may be thoroughly equipped for all religious understanding, activities and duties.
 6. The Bible, therefore, is our supreme and sole authority in all matters that pertain to religion.
 7. Nothing that anyone says in addition to the Bible or about the Bible should carry the weight that the Bible itself carries.
 8. The Bible and the Bible alone is God’s Word and therefore stands above everything else.
- C. In some respects, that is the easiest point for people to arrive at in a discussion of the Bible and Christianity.
1. Two people having a discussion about Christianity can’t really go anywhere until they have decided to agree that what the Bible says will be the authority for their discussion.
 2. Once that point has been nailed down, then comes the more difficult task – the task of interpreting the Bible.
 3. The task of interpreting the Bible is the work of deciding what the Bible means by what it says.
 4. Let me make an important point: In many ways the Bible is simple and clear.
 - a. The most important truths about Jesus and about salvation are not hard to understand.
 - b. God has not made it hard to understand His basic will and commands for His people.
 5. Having said that doesn’t mean that everything in the Bible is simple and clear.
 - a. Anyone who says that the Bible is always clear about what it says and that understanding the Bible is easy, has either never spent much time studying the Bible, or is mistaken.

6. The contention that the Biblical message is always simple and clear is itself not biblical.
7. Peter had this to say about the writings of Paul, "...just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction." (2 Peter 3:15-16)
8. So, if the apostle Peter says that the apostle Paul writes some things that are hard to understand, who am I to disagree with him, right?

D. Each congregation of the Lord's people lives under the authority of the Word of God.

1. It is the congregation, along with its leaders, that must give account for its interpretation of the Scriptures.
2. Congregations must not be derelict in duty by leaving the interpretation of the Scriptures to scholars, or to preachers and elders of the congregation.
3. Certainly scholars, both ancient and present, and local preachers and elders are key players, but all people of God are charged with interpreting the Word correctly.
4. Elders are, of course, to take the lead in calling the congregation to assess the Scriptures and make decisions based upon them.
5. But the Bible is in the hands of all of us and we all have a responsibility to interpret and understand God's will for us individually and for the church as a whole.
6. But as I have already noted, that is not an easy task for any of us, whether we are scholars, elders, preachers or members.

I. **Two Things to Contend With** - There are at least two things we have to contend with as we undertake the task of interpreting God's Word.

A. First, we have to contend with the Bible itself.

1. Indeed, it is a wonderful, amazing book, but several things about it are challenging.
2. First, we must recognize that the Bible is written in many different types of literature.
 - a. The Bible is not written in the literary form of a "how to" manual. Like the one that comes with any new appliance you might buy.
 - b. Much of the Bible is narrative (stories, history), some of it in the Old Testament is law, some of it is poetry and prophecy, and some of it is correspondence (letters).
 - c. The instructions and principles of God are embedded in all those forms of literature, which makes interpretation so challenging.
3. Second, the Bible is written about times and cultures that are far removed from us.
 - a. And so we sometimes struggle understand what was happening in their experience, and then understand the instructions that they were given to address their situation.
 - b. We will talk more about the process of understanding the context in a few minutes.
4. More could certainly be said at this point, but these two illustrate why the task of interpreting God's Word is complicated by the challenges of the Bible itself.

B. The other thing that we have to contend with as we undertake the task of interpreting God's Word is ourselves.

1. Truth is, we are basically selfish people who want the Bible to say what we want it to say.
2. Unfortunately, it is very difficult to come to the Bible and study it without coming to it with our preconceived notions or biased desires.
3. This problem is illustrated very well in the story of the man who thought he was dead.
 - a. His concerned wife and friends sent him to the friendly neighborhood psychiatrist.
 - b. The psychiatrist determined to cure him by convincing him of one fact that contradicted his belief that he was dead.
 - c. The psychiatrist decided to use the simple truth that dead men do not bleed.

- d. He put his patient to work reading medical texts, and observing autopsies.
- e. After weeks of effort, the patient finally said, “All right, all right! You have convinced me that dead men do not bleed.”
- f. The psychiatrist then proceeded to stick the patient in the arm with a needle, and the man began to bleed.
- g. The man looked down at the blood coming from his arm and declared, “Good Lord! Dead men bleed after all!”
- h. Unfortunately, even after our best efforts to be unbiased, and to want to hear only God, we sometimes still get in the way and cannot accept the truth.

II. A Method of Interpretation

- A. So, with those things in mind, let’s proceed to a discussion of a method for interpreting God’s Word.
 1. One book that I have found helpful in evaluating my approach to the interpretation of Scripture is Hearing God’s Voice, My Life with Scripture in the Churches of Christ, by Tom Olbricht.
 2. If you have read his book, you will recognize that some of the things I will suggest are from Tom’s book.
- B. First of all, our method of interpretation must recognize and focus on God as revealed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
 1. The ultimate end of the interpretation of Scripture is to come face-to-face with the living God.
 2. We must never lose sight of that! Our first goal must be to know God and be in relationship.
- C. Second, our method of interpretation must take seriously the basic story line which runs from the Old Testament into the New.
 1. That story line highlights the mighty works of God on behalf of Israel, and for all humankind through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.
 2. The major problem with the approach of those who wish to envision Scripture as chiefly a book of discrete data and rules is that they miss the story line.
 3. In fact, many are not even looking for a story line. Some may even deny that a story line exists, or that if it exists, then it is unimportant.
 4. But to miss the story line of the Bible is to miss the most important thing of all.
 5. The Bible is the story of God and His activity. His power and love is expressed in so many ways toward us, and his plans and promises for our future are wonderful and glorious.
 6. To miss all of that is to miss the most important part! Amen!!!
- D. Third, our method of interpretation must give attention to how this basic story line incorporates specific commands and examples for the church.
 1. Since so much of the Bible is narrative, we have to realize that the commands, examples and inferences for the church are often embedded in story material.
 2. We must be careful about trying to isolate commands, examples, and inferences without giving proper attention to the story from which they came.
 3. The story line from the Scripture is the glue which holds together all the distinct entities.
- E. Fourth, our method of interpretation must be sensitive to historical context.
 1. As we look at any text in Scripture, we have to keep in mind who was writing or speaking, the time it was written, to whom it was written, and the occasion for which it was written.
 2. For this reason we must be keenly aware of historical backgrounds, such as customs, events and people.
 3. We also have to keep in mind the use of words and idioms. Words mean different things to different people at different times.

4. Therefore, we must first determine what something meant to the people of that time, and then we can translate it (so to speak) to our own time.
- F. Fifth, our method of interpretation must result in implications not only for the intellectual process, but for the life of the interpreter.
1. The outcome of our study should lead us to action which emulates our Lord's prior actions.
 2. James wrote, "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says...But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it – he will be blessed in what he does." (Jms. 1:22,25)
 3. Our goal in coming to Scripture must be to know God and be like him.
 4. Warren Wiersbe said it this way, "When the child of God, looks into the Word of God and sees the Son of God, He is changed by the Spirit of God into the image of God for the glory of God."
 5. We shouldn't bother studying God's Word if we don't intend to put it into practice!
- G. F. LaGard Smith wrote a book about biblical interpretation and I really like the method he proposes for interpreting the Bible.
1. He offers four primary "P"s to guide us.
 2. The first "P" is PURPOSE – Our first task in interpretation must be to understand the meaning and purpose of the passage to its original recipients.
 3. The second "P" is PRINCIPLE – The next task is to evaluate how the original meaning and purpose should be implemented in our own situation by means of principles.
 4. The third "P" is PRECEDENT – With precedent we ask the question: Is there something about the biblical example that has obvious universal application?
 5. The final "P" is PRAYER – We must never enter into Biblical study without looking to God's Spirit to direct and guide us into all truth. I would put the last "P" as the first one.

III. What About Silence?

- A. A final consideration for biblical interpretation must respect the silence of the Scriptures.
1. Over the years there has been considerable controversy over the silence of the Scriptures.
 2. Some have taken the silence to be permissive, others have concluded that silence prohibits.
 3. Still others say that since the Bible is not just a book of rules the silence question is the wrong question to be asking.
- B. God has given humans the capacity for language, and He has revealed His will to us by guiding people to write, in existing human languages, so that we can understand His message, just like we understand other communication.
1. So, if "silence" is a factor in the ordinary function of language, then God would expect us to use it in reading Scripture.
 2. You might be thinking, "What is David talking about? I don't know anything about the rule of silence in every day communication!" But I would say, "Oh yes, you do!"
- C. For instance, let's say you have received an invitation to dinner at Bill and Joyce's house.
1. The invitation reads, "What? A dinner invitation for you...Where? Bill and Joyce Perkins' Home...When? Tuesday, November 4, 2014 at 7 PM."
 2. Wouldn't the Perkins expect you to use the law of silence to understand their invitation?
 3. Since one date is specified, wouldn't you understand that all other dates are excluded.
 - a. Do the Perkins have to list all the dates not to come to dinner, or only the one they want?
 - b. By specifying one possibility in of the "date" category, silence about all the other dates naturally excludes them.

4. In the “time” category, 7 p.m. has been specified.
 - a. Silence about all the other times naturally excludes them.
 - b. The Perkins would be surprised, and a bit miffed if you showed up at 7 AM.
 - c. You might try to defend yourself: “But the invitation didn’t say not to come at 7 AM,” but do you think that argument will be persuasive?
5. In the “place” category, the home of the Perkins has been specified.
 - a. They would be very surprised and so would you if you went to Outback Steak house looking to have dinner with the Perkins, because you wouldn’t find them there.
 - b. They don’t have to say, “Don’t go to Outback, or Olive Garden, or McDonalds.”
 - c. All they have to say is where to come, and the silence about the others excludes them.

D. Therefore, we understand the prohibitive principle of silence means that if one or more options out of a category are specified, then silence about all other options in that category excludes them.

1. The Bible is replete with examples of this principle. Let me mention a few:
 - a. King Saul got in trouble with God for making a sacrifice in 1 Sam. 13:13. You ask, when had God told him not to? In Lev. 1:7 and Num. 3:10, God had said that the sons of Aaron were to be the priests and they were to offer the sacrifices. Saul was not a son of Aaron.
 - b. In Numbers 20:8, Moses got in trouble with God for striking the rock when God had told him to speak to the rock. Moses didn’t offer the excuse, “Well, you didn’t say not to strike the rock.”
 - c. When God specified bread and the fruit of the vine for the Lord’s Supper, all other foods are excluded from the supper even though such is not specified.
 - d. The Lord specified elders to lead each congregation, therefore all other leadership systems are excluded.
 - e. Because the Lord has specified immersion as the method of baptism, sprinkling and pouring are excluded.
2. So, when one option out of a category is specified, other options in that category are excluded.
3. That’s just how language and communication operate.
4. When the doctor specifies one drug for a prescription, the pharmacist knows that all other drugs are excluded, even though the doctor has not listed all the exclusions.
5. Back to our dinner invitation illustration. Did you notice a category about which there is total silence?
 - a. Nothing in the invitation said anything about the category of “dress.”
 - b. Total silence about this category, therefore, leaves all options in that category open, and so, in this case, silence is permissive.
 - c. What I wear to the dinner is therefore my choice. (Hawaiian shorts and shirts!)
 - d. Had the invitation said, “formal attire” then one type out of the category of “dress” would have been specified and all others would have been excluded.

E. Therefore, we understand the permissive principle of silence means that if a category is left open with nothing specified, then we may choose any options in that category.

1. Thus, with regard to the Lord’s Supper, the day for partaking is specified as the first day of the week, but there is silence about the time of day, so we may observe it at any hour.
2. As Christians we are commanded to assemble, but the length of the service, the place of meeting, and the order in which we arrange what we do together is unspecified.
3. Silence about these things allows us to choose all the options from these categories.

F. Therefore, we must understand that God has revealed His will to us in the ordinary language of people and He expects us to exercise the same use of silence in His communication to us that we would in communication with each other.

1. We should neither restrict where God has allowed freedom nor presume to do something beyond what He has specified.

2. Thus, silence prohibits options in a category in which God has specified, and it permits in categories where God has not specified.

Conclusion:

- A. Today, as we have discussed a method for interpreting the Bible, we have moved from the general to the specific, but to conclude today's lesson, I would like to move back to the general.
 1. We can get so bogged down in the minute questions of the Bible and the church that we miss the biggest and most significant points and principles of God.
 2. I like the illustration used by someone who said that principles in Scripture are like different-sized bills – some are \$100 bills, some \$50s and \$20s, and some are \$1.00 bills.
 - a. All currency has value; it's just that some bills are worth more than others.
 - b. Similarly, even though all principles and commands in Scripture have value, some are more important than others.
 - c. When Jesus criticized the Pharisees in Matthew 23:23, he said, "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices – mint, dill, and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy, and faithfulness. You ought to have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former."
 3. Biblical interpretation is much more far reaching than simply observing the Lord's Supper with correct regularity. It has to do with the total life of the congregation as individuals vibrantly eating Jesus' meal as God's people.
 4. We may make many right biblical observations, like baptism means immersion, but if we are not careful we will stress the mechanics of obedience and miss the importance of the new life to which baptism points and initiates.
 5. We have rightly viewed a man as a sinner in need of salvation, but we are mistaken when we chiefly see him as a violator of rules rather than one who fails to love God with all of his heart, soul, mind and strength.
- B. In a real sense, biblical interpretation is the interpreting of God to those who wish to be His.
 1. Even God did not propose to introduce himself by a set of simple rules, rather he sent his Son.
 2. John 1:18 says, "No man has ever seen God, but God the only Son, who is at the Father's side, has made him known." (exegeomai – Jesus exegetes the Father. Jesus is the interpretation.)
 3. The primary message of the Bible is Jesus - we are called to be like him.
- C. As I said from the start – interpreting the Bible is not simple or easy. We need to approach it seriously and humbly and be ready to obey it.
 1. I like what Mark Twain said about the Bible, "I'm not worried about the Scripture I don't understand, the one's that bother me are those I do understand."
 2. We must be seeking to obey the Word, not just know it and understand it.
- D. So How are each of us doing in this regard?
 1. Are we making every effort to understand and obey the Word of God?
 2. That's what Paul charged Timothy to do: Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth (2 Tim. 2:15).
 3. We should do our very best to do the same – to correctly handle the word of God.
 4. That means doing our best to know it, understand it, obey it, and to teach others to do the same.