

Interpreting and Applying the Bible Effectively

I. Lesson # 1: The Linguistic or Grammatical Principle

Introduction: Absolutely essential. "Curse of Ham" in Gen. 9:18-29

A. Pay attention to individual words:

1. Tense of verbs-cf. 1 John 3:6,9
2. Whether singular or Plural-cf. 1 Cor. 3:16-17 & 6:19
3. Is it first, second or third person-cf. Heb. 5:11-6:12
4. What gender-cf. 1 Cor. 7:25

B. Watch for figures of speech:

1. Similes-comparison with use of "like" or "as"
2. Metaphors-comparison without use of "like" or "as"
3. Hyperboles-deliberate exaggerations for purpose of making a point

C. Watch phrases and clauses:

1. What is the context?
2. What do they modify?

D. Study with caution parables and allegories:

1. Parables-usually one central truth
2. Allegories-details also important.

E. Identify the kind of literature:

1. Sermonic? (e.g., sermons in Acts)
2. Poetical? (Psalms, etc.)
3. Apocalyptic? (Revelation)
4. Historical narrative? (Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel, etc.)
5. Wisdom literature? (Proverbs, etc.)
6. Prophetic literature? (Prophets)
 - a) Future predictions?
 - b) Ethical demands?

F. Use some helps:

1. Read passage in more than one version or translation

2. Use books on word studies

II. "Lesson #2: The Historical Principle

A. Author:

Who is the person doing the speaking or writing? Is it Moses or Amos or Paul? Sometimes it is not possible to know exactly who it is, but it is important to remember that sometimes the Bible actually records some words and statements that it does not endorse or agree with. An example of this is Psalm 14:1 where it says "There is no God." A study of that will reveal that it is the fool who has said those words and therefore the Bible does not endorse that statement.

B. Date:

When did that person live? Know the date of the author and of the book. We cannot always establish this, but it can be helpful many times if we know the time period in which that person lived. For example the book of Revelation. If Revelation were written during the time of Nero when Christians were undergoing persecution or under Domitian when they were undergoing persecution it would make a big difference in how we interpret many portions of that book. If a person believes that John was transported by God into the twentieth century to write that book and he didn't write it at all against first century persecution, then that will make a profound difference in how that book is interpreted.

C. Culture and customs of the era:

1. Notice Deut. 14:21b. A Jewish custom grew out of this in which no meat could be eaten with milk. But a custom in the pagan religion of that day offered a sacrifice to an idol by stewing the animal in its mother's milk. This was probably a prohibition against pagan idolatry. It probably did not originate as a dietary practice at all.

2. Notice Gen. 12:13. Abraham tells Sarah to tell the Pharaoh that she was his sister. In Gen. 20:12 Sarah is said to have been his half-sister. But in some clay tablets dating to that period found at a place called Nuzu they tell of husbands sometimes adopting wives as their sisters in order to inherit from their side of the family. This could be a reflection of the love and care of a husband to provide for his widow after his death.

3. Notice Gen. 31 where Laban comes to search the belongings of Jacob and Rachel for his household gods and cannot find them because Rachel has them hid beneath a cushion on which she is sitting. Was Laban really that religious? Those Nuzu tablets tell that sometimes household gods were the same as deeds to one's property. Therefore, knowing this custom could influence how we interpret Laban's frantic search for the household gods.

4. See Matt. 16:18-19 where Jesus talked about giving to them the "keys" and also used the words to "bind and loose." How were these words used in the first century among the Jews? This could greatly influence our interpretation.

5. Some of the ethical teachings of Jesus can be better understood by this principle-such as the "second mile" ethic and the "turning the other cheek" ethic. Most everyone knows that a Roman soldier could force a local native to carry his military pack a mile, but no more. And Jesus commands his disciples to "go the second mile."

D. Meaning to the original hearers and/or readers:

1. Study carefully the historical application and meaning to the original hearers or readers before trying to draw a lesson and making application to our own day. We often can draw a principle and apply it to our day, but we need to be careful that we do not make everything said to them apply directly to us. For example, does Paul's admonition to Timothy to take wine for his stomach mean that all preachers today must take wine when they have an upset stomach? The custom in that day was that wine was a medicine, and therefore, the principle could be to use medicine for upset stomachs today, but it wouldn't have to mean that a preacher should use alcoholic beverages today.

2. Some promises of God were to particular individuals in their day, and therefore, might not necessarily apply to us today.

E. Nation, country, etc.:

1. Is a nation mentioned in the passage? We need to try to know something about that nation so we can understand what God is saying about it in particular. Is the nation Babylon? Is it Assyria? Is it Persia? What do we know about those ancient countries and their cultures or religions that might help us understand what God is saying in that particular day?

2. Is there a river or a mountain that is mentioned? Knowing where the rivers were located in the Genesis account of the Garden of Eden will profoundly influence our understanding and interpretation of the size of the Garden of Eden. Many early Christian and Jewish scholars understood two of those rivers to be the same as the Blue and White Nile in Egypt and the other two to be the Tigris and Euphrates in what we now call Iraq. This would profoundly change one's understanding of the size of the Garden of Eden. Or, were all four rivers located within the same country?

III. Lesson #3: The Contextual Principle

Introduction: There are at least five dimensions to the contextual principle. We might call them concentric circles of the contextual principle because they are related somewhat like circles moving outward from where a pebble is dropped in the water.

A. The immediate context:

Look at the verse before and the verse after a given verse of scripture or the passage before and the passage after. Sometimes we should read extensively before and after, but by all means we must read the immediate verse before and verse after if we are going to interpret simply one single verse. Notice Matt. 5:48 where Jesus says to them "be ye perfect." A few verses up before that Jesus is speaking on the subject of love and is not speaking about the perfection of one's character. Some Christian groups have understood this to teach sinless, perfectionism on the part of the Christian. But does it in reality? The linguistic principle here would make us look at the Greek word translated by our English word perfect and that Greek word actually means to be mature or to be grown up, and therefore this would influence our interpretation of what Jesus is saying here.

Notice also 1 Cor. 14:34-35 where Paul is instructing the women to keep silent in the churches. In the passages before that he has been speaking about two subjects: interrupting preachers when they are delivering their sermons and also speaking in tongues. Which of these does Paul have in mind? Is he asking them not to interrupt the preacher, but ask their husbands when they get home what the preacher said? This is possible since the men and boys sat toward the front and the women may have been segregated in the back of the fellowship somewhat like they were in Jewish synagogues. On the other hand, it could be that he is asking them not to speak in tongues in public assembly. But in either case, one needs to study the context of this passage very carefully.

B. Context of the book:

Notice where 1 Cor. 13 is situated. It comes right between chapter 12 and chapter 14 in which Paul is speaking on the matter of spiritual gifts and speaking in tongues. Scholars are persuaded that most of our New Testament books, especially the epistles, were written all at one time, and therefore, we must see where a given passage fit within the logic and thought and fabric of the entire book.

C. Other passages by the same author:

If one is interpreting what Paul says in 1 Cor. 14 about women keeping silent he ought to also read all the other passages by Paul on women in all his other letters. Paul may not reveal in one or two passages of scripture his theology about the place and role of women. To be fair to Paul, all his passages in all his letters ought to be studied and compared and brought together and harmonized as a whole in order to get his teaching on women.

D. Other passages by other authors on the same subject:

1. Before a person says the New Testament teaches such and such on a given doctrine like baptism or faith or salvation or heaven or hell, etc., he ought to read all passages in the entire New Testament on that same subject and not simply build his doctrine on one or two verses alone.
2. This would hold true for the Old Testament. Before one says the Old Testament teaches thus and thus he ought to read all passages in the entire old Testament on that same subject by all the authors and come to an understanding of the total teaching of the whole Old Testament on that subject.

E. The whole Bible:

Before someone says the "Bible" teaches thus and thus he ought to pay the price of reading all passages in the entire Bible, and that means both Old and New Testaments, on a given subject before he says the Bible teaches this. For example on tithing. Before one says the Bible teaches thus and thus on tithing he ought to take a concordance and look up the word tithing or tithing and look up every passage of scripture and study the whole Bible's teaching on it and thus he will better understand by studying all the verses put together what is the wholistic teaching of the Bible. The same would be true on any subject. For example if one wanted to teach what the Bible said about heaven or death or final judgment, then that person should pay the price of studying all passages in the whole Bible and arriving at his understanding from the total teaching.

Lesson #4: The Theological Principle & The Practical Principle:

A. The Theological Principle

1. Concept of progressive revelation

- a) God revealed more as mankind responded to His revelation
- b) Not evolutionary developmentalism
- c) Similar to child growing up and being able to understand more
- d) Similar to math: builds on top of prior knowledge

2. Old Testament was preparation for the New Testament

- a) Sacrificial system was preparation for Christ's sacrifice
- b) Priestly system was preparation for Christ's being the true High Priest (see Heb. 4:14-10:18)
- c) Prophets were preparation for Christ
- d) Concept of life after death very limited when compared to New Testament

3. New Testament has higher ethical and theological concepts than the old Testament

- a) Patriarchs practiced polygamy; they are not our authority; Christ is
- b) People in Old Testament practiced "holy war"; Jesus taught to love one's enemies, to turn the other cheek, and to go the second mile
- c) People in Old Testament advocated revenge; Jesus taught to do good to those who persecuted us
- d) But Christians need to understand that the people of Old Testament era did not know as much as we do after Christ taught us; they didn't have as much light as we do. We must interpret and understand them in the light of their knowledge, not ours.

B. The Practical Principle:

1. What should I believe as a result of reading this particular passage of scripture? (doctrine? teaching? moral principle? etc.)
2. What should I do? (avoid a sin? include a virtue?)

3. What character trait should I appropriate?
4. What attitude should I reject?
5. What would I want someone else to get out of this passage of scripture?
6. As honestly as I know how, how can I apply this to my life without artificially twisting or forcing it?
7. What in the passage will help me honor God more?
8. What will help me serve others more unselfishly?
9. What in it will help me be more Christ-like?

V. Lesson #5: Three Special Principles

A. The Literal Principle

1. This principle says that we are to understand the words exactly as they are given, that is in the surface or apparent meaning. We are not to look for a deeper or higher or other meaning than simply what the words apparently say and mean in their normal, natural sense.
2. This is the principle that we basically use for scripture unless we have reason to believe the passage is intended to be taken figuratively.
3. This does not mean to take figurative language in a crassly literal way. This principle allows figurative language to be taken figuratively. But this principle insists that we take it at the surface value unless the author or writer gives us clues that he is using the words in a figurative or allegorical way.
4. Where people, places, and numbers are used this principle says we are to take them in the literal way unless they are clearly used in a symbolic way. For example, sometimes the number 7 might be used in a symbolic or figurative way and this principle would say to take it then in that way, otherwise we are to take it as the actual number 7.
5. This principle presupposes some common sense and use of general intelligence. For example, where Jesus says in John 14 "ask anything" in my name, common sense would help us to know that asking anything would not include helping us jump over the moon or swim the Pacific Ocean or live a year without eating food.

B. The Figurative Principle:

1. This principle says the words say one thing but they actually mean something else. The author intended us to see another meaning and not simply stay with the surface or apparent meaning of his words.
2. This principle recognizes that there is a figurative type of literature such as parables, metaphors, and allegories.

3. We are not to apply this principle unless we have studied the context of the passage and the words carefully and are persuaded the author himself intended another meaning to be sought.
4. Notice Matt. 5:29-30 where Jesus commands us to cut off a hand or gouge out our eye. This is clearly to be taken figuratively and was intended to be taken so by Jesus because this is a figure of speech called a hyperbole. A hyperbole is by definition a figure of speech and therefore, intended by the author to be taken figuratively.
5. Notice Matt. 5:13-14 where Jesus calls his followers salt and light. These are metaphors and by definition a metaphor is a figure of speech without the word "like" or "as." These were clearly intended to be taken by the author in a figurative manner and not in a straightforward literal manner. To take these in a straightforward literal manner would make them absurd.
6. Notice the parables. A parable is by definition an "earthly story with a heavenly meaning." Therefore, a parable is intended to make a comparison and teach a higher or spiritual truth by using lower or earthly story, therefore, one is to seek a central truth or central teaching and not simply take this in a straightforward literal way. For example where Jesus compares God to a judge and a woman comes to the judge and begs until she gets what she wants. He is teaching persistence in prayer, but he is not meaning that God is a hard-hearted judge that has to be nagged into giving us what we pray for. To press the analogies too close and too literally would destroy the central teaching of the parable. Virtually all New Testament teachers recognize that parables teach one central truth.

C. The Allegorical Principle:

1. By definition an allegory is an extended figure of speech. Therefore, this is the application of the figurative principle even to the details of a story.
2. Whereas parables teach one central truth and we are warned by teachers not to go inside parables and make every detail figurative in some manner, the allegory is different. It is by definition a story intended by the author or writer to have the details symbolic and figurative as well as the overall teaching.
3. Notice the parable of the sower or the parable of the soils in Matt. 13. In this passage Jesus interprets the individual items within the story to symbolize something else. Notice that each kind of soil stands for a different kind of listener. Therefore, where the author or the writer or the speaker interprets details in a figurative way then we are on sound ground when we interpret it accordingly. This is therefore an allegory because the details are also to be interpreted.
4. Great caution is to be used in the application of the allegorical principle. It is very easy to become irresponsible and fanciful and make everything in the Bible have an allegorical meaning or meanings.

Our guideline is that only if we have good evidence that the author intended what he said to be taken in allegorical manner.

5. One form of allegory is "spiritualizing." This seeks a spiritual blessing from every passage of scripture and sometimes can force from scripture meanings, which perhaps were not put there at all by the original author. For example, where in the book of Acts when Paul faces the shipwreck he throws out four anchors. Some interpret those four anchors as being prayer, Bible study, church attendance, and witnessing. But there is nothing in the text of the Bible to indicate those were anything other than literal anchors. This is called spiritualizing.

6. The Bible writer and the Bible text and context are to be our guides whether we are to interpret something in an allegorical manner.