

Feeding Yourself From the Word of God

Workshop#4: Interpretation (D. Parlett)

Welcome to Workshop #4:

The key to your our Bible Study will be steadiness. Many people begin with great enthusiasm and good intentions but relatively few make personal Bible Study a consistent, persistent, you-can't-make-me-quit part of their lives. Do what it takes to make it a life long habit. Perhaps at first that means not being too ambitious either in how often or how much you aim to cover in your study. Start slowly and build. Also, think carefully about when and where you do your study. Many like to do their Bible Study first thing in the morning. The main thing is to find a time and a place for regular, peaceful, undistracted time with your Lord.

Review:

Do you know the three key or foundational steps of Bible Study? Hint: O I A

What is the first step of Observation any time you do Bible Study?

Did you apply any of the new observation techniques we learned last week?

In this workshop, we will cover:

Interpretation

Introduction

In this workshop, we will dive into the next key step of Bible Study: **Interpretation**. Before we do that, I need to clarify something. As you study a passage, you are often observing, interpreting and even applying the truths of that verse at the same time. Or, if it's not at the same time, I often find myself skipping around between the steps: some observation, a little interpretation, a touch of application, a smidgen of observation, a teensy bit more close observation, then a pinch more application, maybe a skosh more observation and then I go back and interpret a section that I skipped earlier. You get the idea. Normally one does not proceed robotically from observation to interpretation and then to application. BUT for the sake of clarity in these workshops we will go step by step. Just understand that in reality it's more piecemeal.

So then, for the second step, **Interpretation**, we will begin to look at the history of interpretation of the Bible and the four most foundational principles of Hermeneutics (which is just a fancy word for: the science of interpretation. Practice saying this word ("Hermen-oo-tics") and you will have found an easy way to impress all your friends and family. Good luck!). And thus, pretensions aside, we are beginning to really make strides in our walk through the Word.

A. A Brief History of Biblical Interpretation

The Quadriga. The Quadriga was a method of interpretation that developed in the early church and survived up to medieval times. It stated that a text had four layers of meaning: the literal, the moral, the allegorical and the anagogical. The literal is the plain obvious meaning. The moral was what it meant for human behavior. The allegorical meaning is what it means for our faith, beliefs or doctrines. The anagogical meaning is what it tells us about the future (heaven). For example take a reference to the city of Jerusalem. In the literal sense this meant the physical city of Jerusalem. Morally it could represent the human soul. Allegorically it could be used to represent the Church of Christ. Finally, anagogically, it could be referring the new heavenly Jerusalem. Unfortunately, this method led to many wild speculations about the meaning of certain passages. Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation changed that. Now we focus on the literal interpretation.

Feeding Yourself From the Word of God
Workshop#4: Interpretation (D. Parlett) (page 2)

The Catholic Church. The Catholic Church teaches that only the Church may determine the correct meaning of the passage. Because of this, they discourage individual interpretation of the Scripture. In fact, the Church killed quite a few people for trying to translate the Bible into the common languages of their countries. For example: John Hus and William Tyndale Why were the Church leaders so adamant about not letting individuals interpret the Bible? Do you agree or disagree with their concern? What about heresy?

The Reformation. Martin Luther and other leaders of the Reformation challenged the prevailing attitude towards Biblical interpretation (in fact the Reformation was sparked in part by Luther's personal study of the Bible). The Reformers argued that the individual could interpret scripture for himself. So first he needed it in his language, if he didn't know Latin or Greek or Hebrew. Now Luther was also concerned about heresy. He argued that it was possible for both individuals and the official Church to misinterpret scripture. What would help both not to do this? Answer coming right up.

Hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is the art and science of interpretation (the name comes from Hermes who was the messenger of the Gods in Greek Mythology). Hermeneutics are the rules and guidelines that help us get the correct "message" of a text. Correct hermeneutics almost always results in correct interpretation, usually. It begins with the idea that the author had a singular and particular meaning to what he wrote. This means that a verse has only one meaning for everyone (it may have many different individual applications but only one meaning or intent). The rules of Hermeneutics help us determine this as best as possible and safeguard us from heresy.

B. The Foundational Rules of Hermeneutics

The Bible is generally easy to understand:

The foundation of hermeneutics is that, in general, the Bible is easy to understand. It's really not that confusing or mystical. This is why it's OK to study our Bibles in a translation in our language. We are going to get almost all the meanings pretty clearly. Most passages and verses are plain and clear. We understand what is being said very easily and right away. But for some verses we run into difficulty, so we turn to other important Hermeneutical rules.

Scripture Interprets Scripture:

OK, if we are wrestling with the meaning of a passage then we will give first consideration to what other parts of scripture have to say on this topic, if there are any. For example, we read in Luke 6: 20, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God". Does this teach that we should be poor? How would other passages help us here? First look at a parallel passage: Matthew 5:3. Can you find others that help shed light here? Use your concordance to find other helpful verses.

Taking into account the Literary Genre:

There are many types of literature just within the Bible. There is narrative (stories), poetry, song lyrics, proverbs, teaching passages and prophetic sections to name some. Our interpretation will be determined by what type of literature we are dealing with. Each type is handled differently. For example, does Psalm 91:4 says, "He (God) will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge." Does this mean God is a big chicken? Why would you interpret this differently? Taking the Bible literally doesn't mean that we don't take it "literarily". I can take it as the Infallible Word of God expressed in a variety of styles. We will go over how to handle different types (or genres) of literature later in this study [Workshop #5].

Feeding Yourself From the Word of God
Workshop#4: Interpretation (D. Parlett) (page 3)

The Context:

This includes both the historical / cultural context that you researched at the beginning of the Observation process and also the context of the verse within the passage, the chapter, and even the whole book. Typically the immediate context will shed the most light on the meaning of the passage. This is why studying a whole book is so beneficial. Recently I changed the way I interpret a passage because I was studying the whole section. (2 Corinthians 5:11-21. Is this talking about evangelism?).

C. Goals for this workshop:

1. Continue to try outlining on your passage.
2. Start keeping a list of possible applications from your passage. If something is not clear, see if any of the foundational Hermeneutical principles will help.

D. Next Workshop:

How to handle different types of literature in the Bible.

E. Workshop #4: Questions / Exercises

Historical Interpretation:

1. Why do you think the Quadriga developed? Why were they looking for deeper meanings other than the literal? What is the danger of the other layers of meaning?
2. What are the pros and the cons of having anyone interpret the scripture themselves? What then is the role of the educated teacher (or pastor)?

Interpretation Exercises:

Try these exercises. Usually they can be answered by applying the foundational rules of Hermeneutics above.

3. Take a look at Proverbs 22:28. What is the meaning of this? What cultural facts would help in your understanding of this verse? What would it mean at that time? What would be an application for us today?

Feeding Yourself From the Word of God
Workshop#4: Interpretation (D. Parlett) (page 4)

4. Galatians 5:1b says “Stand firm, then and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.” Is this referring to slavery such as was practiced in the early United States? Is it a political slavery? Is it a spiritual slavery? Look at the context and make your own choice (but make it the right one!).

5. In Matthew 9:18-26 the section in my Bible is entitled “A Dead Girl and a Sick Woman”. Read the passage carefully. Do you think the girl was dead? Why or why not? Read the parallel passages in Mark 5:22-43 and Luke 8:41-56. Do these help you clarify at all?

6. A friend defends the idea of having premarital sex as long as they are engaged. He quotes 1 Corinthians 6:12, “Everything is permissible for me” and further Colossians 3:15, “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts” and since they feel a peace about this they feel justified. Is this the proper use of these verses? Why or why not? How would you answer your friend?

7. In 1 Timothy 3:12 Paul seems to be saying that women should not teach men. Do you agree? If not, why not? Is this a universal or a command just for that time? How would you justify the later? If you were the leader of a church what rules if any would you institute about teaching in the church?

F. Key steps so far:

1. Choose a section to study.
2. Learn about the Background of the book you are studying.
3. Observation: Try different techniques to become familiar with a part or all of your section.
4. Interpretation: Usually the meaning is pretty clear. If not, then we bring in the rules of Hermeneutics to help.