

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by beginning to look at the proper way to interpret the Bible. Dr. Spencer, let me start by asking you a question that I suspect a number of our listeners may have. I know how to read and can think for myself, so why do I need any rules to help me understand the Bible?

Dr. Spencer: I think the answer to that question has two parts. First and foremost, because of the supreme importance of the topic, we want to be extremely careful to be sure that we understand the Bible correctly. The possible consequences for not correctly interpreting a newspaper article, or even something far more important like a medical textbook, cannot be compared with the eternal consequences of misinterpreting the Bible.

Marc Roby: But some people will point out that we are saved by faith in the person of Jesus Christ, and a true Christian has a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, so my salvation is not based on my being a great theologian, it is based on my relationship to the person of Christ.

Dr. Spencer: That's true. But, you must have a relationship with the *true* Jesus Christ. In 2 Corinthians 11:3-4 the apostle Paul expressed his deep concern for the church in Corinth. He wrote, "I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough."¹

This warning highlights a very important point. We know Jesus *only because* someone came and preached to us, whether it was spoken or in writing makes no difference. The essential point is that we learn about Jesus Christ and salvation from the Bible, either directly, or indirectly. But, there are many distortions out there, what Paul calls "a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached." All you have to do is look at all of the competing claims of people who call themselves Christians to know that is true.

Marc Roby: I don't think anyone can dispute that there are a lot of differing views about Jesus and what he taught. And our understanding of what the Bible teaches has eternal consequences, in 2 Peter 3:16 we read that people distort the Scriptures to their own destruction.

Dr. Spencer: And that is precisely the reason we need to be very careful in this area. Not only is what we believe of supreme importance because our eternal salvation at stake – that was the first part of the answer to your initial question, but we also have a large number of different ideas being presented to us and we need to be sure that we can correctly ferret out which ones are right

¹ All scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® (1984 version). Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com The "NIV" and "New International Version" are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™.

and which ones are wrong. So, the second part of the answer is that we need a methodical and thoughtful way to deal with what can be a complex and controversial topic.

Marc Roby: I think that answers the question. And, perhaps it would be good at this point to mention that the science of properly interpreting the Bible is called hermeneutics.

Dr. Spencer: And when we put the principles of hermeneutics into practice to do our best to determine what a particular verse or passage means, we are doing what is called exegesis, which means to draw the meaning out of the passage. This can be contrasted with eisegesis, which means to put meaning into the passage, which is an all-too-common practice that any true Christian should work very hard to avoid.

Marc Roby: Alright. So, how should we approach Bible study?

Dr. Spencer: First of all, we must study the Bible believing it to be God's infallible Word, which is why we spent time establishing that point in past few sessions. If the bible isn't God's infallible Word, then we are without a sure guide and are left up to our own subjective ideas of what to believe and how to live a life pleasing to God.

Marc Roby: And, as we have noted a number of times, we must be born again in order to having real saving faith in Jesus Christ and to believe in the infallibility of God's Word.

Dr. Spencer: Absolutely. We've quoted 1 Corinthians 2:14 before, which tells us that "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned."

So, that is the first thing we must do to properly approach Bible study. Secondly, we must study the Bible with prayer and diligence. In Luke 11:13 Jesus promised us that our "Father in heaven [will] give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" So, we must come to God in prayer and ask for the Holy Spirit to guide us as we study his Word. And we must note that we are talking about *study* of the Bible, not casual reading. God has made it abundantly clear in many places in his word that he will not reward those who seek him half-heartedly or according to their own ideas. In fact, he hates their so-called worship.

Marc Roby: Now, that last statement goes against much of what the modern church teaches about God. He is pictured as a loving and patient father who doesn't hate anything or anyone.

Dr. Spencer: That is a common picture of God, but it is one that is easily shown to be false if you simply look in his word; in other words, if you properly exegete the Word of God. This is a good example of why we need the science of hermeneutics!

For example, let's look at the prophet Amos. He lived in the 8th century before Christ when the Jewish people were divided into two kingdoms, one in the north – usually called Israel – and one in the south – usually called Judah. This was a time of relative peace and prosperity, much like our own time in this country. And yet, God sent Amos to the northern kingdom to deliver a message of doom to the people. In Amos 5:21-23 we read that God said, "I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have

no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps.”

Marc Roby: Those are pretty harsh words.

Dr. Spencer: Yes they are. And notice that the people were having religious feasts and assemblies, they were bringing burnt offerings, grain offerings and fellowship offerings as the law required, and they were singing – presumably songs of praise to God. But, they were not doing what was right. Religious activities are not all acceptable to God, they must be done with a clean heart and according to his Word.

I could mention many other passages, but I’ll refrain for now. The point is that this idea of God being like a cosmic grandfather who never gets angry with anyone and doesn’t hate anything or anyone simply cannot stand up to a careful study of his Word.

Marc Roby: Alright. So, we need to believe the Bible to be the infallible Word of God and we need to study it diligently, with prayer. What else do we need to do?

Dr. Spencer: We need to learn how to understand the Word properly, in other words, we need proper hermeneutical principles, which is what we are getting ready to study.

Marc Roby: From where do we get these rules for proper interpretation?

Dr. Spencer: In large measure we get them from the Bible itself, and the ones we don’t get from the Bible itself are part and parcel of normal human communication, which is a gift given to us by our creator God. So, all of them come from God in a sense. Let me explain this as we look at the rules.

Marc Roby: Please do.

Dr. Spencer: The first and most important rule of proper interpretation, or hermeneutics, is sometimes called the analogy of faith, although I don’t find that phrase particularly descriptive. The idea is that Scripture should always be used to interpret Scripture.

Marc Roby: I’m not convinced that statement is completely clear either.

Dr. Spencer: I suppose you’re right, it isn’t clear by itself. It needs to be explained. The idea is a direct result of the fact that the Bible comprises the very words of God. The Bible clearly teaches in Deuteronomy 32:4, Matthew 5:48 and elsewhere that God is perfect and therefore his words are perfect, which is also stated explicitly in Psalms 18:30 and 19:7. It also tells us that God cannot lie, which is stated in Titus 1:2 and Hebrews 6:18. So, given all of those facts, it must be true that God’s words will be completely consistent and truthful. As a result, the Bible cannot contradict itself. If we find one part of the Bible somewhat difficult to understand, we should look to see if the same idea is expressed more clearly or completely somewhere else. So, we use one part of Scripture to help us interpret another part of Scripture. This rule is a necessary consequence of the Bible’s own teaching about the perfection of God and his Word.

Marc Roby: Paul also implicitly used this rule when he defended his teachings to King Agrippa and Festus. In Acts 26:22-23 Paul said, “I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and

Moses said would happen—that the Christ would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim light to his own people and to the Gentiles.”

Dr. Spencer: That’s a good point – he is claiming that his own teaching has authority because it is consistent with the Old Testament teaching.

Marc Roby: Can you give us an example of how this rule works in practice?

Dr. Spencer: Certainly. Let me take a passage that is very often misused in the modern church. In Matthew 7:1 Jesus Christ said, “Do not judge, or you too will be judged.” Now, in the Greek, this is in the imperative mood, which means it is a command, “Do not judge”. I’ve had people quote this to me and then say that it means that we should never judge anyone under any circumstances whatsoever.

Marc Roby: I’ve heard people interpret the verse that way as well.

Dr. Spencer: But, the idea of using the Scripture to interpret Scripture means that you can’t take one verse out of context and use it to justify some doctrine. If you look in the rest of Scripture, you find that such an understanding of that verse cannot possibly be correct. For example, in 1 Corinthians Chapter 5 the apostle Paul is chastising the Corinthian church for allowing a man who was committing sexual immorality to remain in their fellowship and he writes, in Verse 12, “What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside?” This is a rhetorical question and the expected answer is “Yes, we are to judge those inside the church” as becomes completely obvious in the next verse where Paul commands them to “Expel the wicked man from among you.” Now, if Matthew 7:1 really meant that we should never judge anyone, Paul’s command to the Corinthian church would be wrong. But given that all of Scripture is the infallible Word of God we must seek to understand Matthew 7:1 in the light of other Scriptures that also speak of judging. When we do that, we find that it cannot be a blanket prohibition against judging others.

Marc Roby: I find it interesting that Jesus actually gives an implicit command for us to judge others later on in Matthew 7. In Verses 15-16 he says, “Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them.” In other words, we are to judge those who claim to bring God’s word to us and we are to determine which of them are false prophets.

Dr. Spencer: That is a great point. I don’t want to get off track and dive into the topic of judging in any depth right now, but suffice it to say that when you consider what all of Scripture says on the topic you find out that what is condemned is not judging in general, but hypocritical judging of others, or judging on disputable matters, or based on human standards rather than God’s standard.

Marc Roby: That makes good sense.

Dr. Spencer: I think that James Boice gives a good alternate way of describing this same principle of interpretation. Rather than saying let Scripture interpret Scripture, he breaks the principle down into two principles: unity and noncontradiction. He writes that “Taken together

[these principles] mean that ... (1) the parts of the [Bible] must go together to tell one story, and (2) if two parts seem to be in opposition or in contradiction to each other, our interpretation of one or both of these parts must be in error.”²

Marc Roby: That is a good alternate wording of the principle. I can think of another example where this principle comes into play as well. Paul writes in Romans 3:28 that “a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.” And we read in James 2:24, “that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.” Now, if someone is just out looking for contradictions, they might think that they have found one in these two verses.

Dr. Spencer: As you know, these verses were debated at the time of the reformation since the cry of the reformation is that we are saved by faith alone. The Roman Catholic church pointed to this verse in James to refute that idea. But, interpreting Scripture by Scripture will not allow us to pit one verse of Scripture against another, which is Boice’s principle of noncontradiction. Because God is the author, we must seek an understanding that removes the apparent contradiction.

In this particular example, it isn’t really that hard. Paul and James are using the word “justify” in two different senses. Paul is using it in the forensic sense, meaning to be declared just, or righteous, in God’s sight. Such justification *is* by faith alone. James, on the other hand, is using the word in the sense of proving something. So, by saying someone is justified by what he does, he means that what he does proves his faith to be genuine.

Marc Roby: Which is easily seen when you look at all of James Chapter 2.

Dr. Spencer: Absolutely. When you look at the chapter as a whole, you see what kind of faith he is talking about. He is arguing against the idea that a person can have true faith without any good deeds. James argues that such faith isn’t true faith at all. In fact, in Verse 17 he writes that “faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead”. So, when he says that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone, he means that the reality of his faith is proven by what he does. He is also using the word “faith” in a different sense than Paul did. A person may have a mental-assent faith, but if he has no works, he does not have true saving faith, which is trust in Jesus Christ for salvation, and that is the faith that Paul is speaking about in Romans 3:28. When we look at this more carefully, we see that Paul and James are in complete agreement.

Marc Roby: Alright. So we have our first principle of proper biblical interpretation. It can be called the analogy of faith, or we can say to let Scripture interpret Scripture, or we can say the Bible is a unity and cannot contradict itself. This also agrees with the Westminster Confession of Faith. In Chapter 1, Paragraph 9, the confessions says, “The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.”

² James Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, Revised in One Volume, InterVarsity Press, 1986, pg. 91

Dr. Spencer: That's a very good summary.

Marc Roby: What other principles do we have?

Dr. Spencer: The second principle is that we should interpret the Bible literally. But, that needs some more explanation. The word literal is usually taken mean that something adheres to the primary meaning of the individual words. So, for example, if I were to say to you that it's raining cats and dogs, that could not be literally true in the common sense of the word literal. What is historically meant by this term in biblical studies however, is that we should interpret the Bible as literature. In other words, we take the ordinary meaning of an expression. In that sense, you would interpret my statement that it's raining cats and dogs to literally mean that it was raining very hard. The literal sense was stressed by Martin Luther and other reformers in contrast with the standard four-fold procedure in use at the time, called the quadriga.³

Marc Roby: How did that procedure work?

Dr. Spencer: The idea of the quadriga is that a verse may have four different meanings: the literal – in the same sense Luther used that term, the moral, the allegorical and the spiritual. In other words, every verse has a normal literal meaning, then it may also have a moral meaning that said something about how we are to behave, an allegorical meaning that revealed something about what we are to believe, and a spiritual meaning that said something about our future hope.

Marc Roby: And, that ladies and gentlemen, could lead to quite a mess.

Dr. Spencer: It certainly can and did. The Puritan theologian William Perkins wrote to criticize the results of using the quadriga to interpret Genesis 14:18-19, where we read that “Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. He was priest of God Most High, and he blessed Abram”. Our listeners need to remember that God later changed Abram's name to Abraham. In any event, Perkins wrote the following: “The literal sense is, that the King of Salem with meat which he brought, refreshed the soldiers of Abraham being tired with travel. The allegorical is, that the Priest [does] offer up Christ in [the] mass. The [moral] is, therefore something is to be given to the poor. The [spiritual] is, that Christ in like manner being in heaven, shall be the bread of life to the faithful.”⁴ (language modernized and terms made consistent with our treatment)

Marc Roby: That is a lot to supposedly draw from just that verse. I can see that there is a lot more to say about what is properly meant by interpreting the Bible literally, but we are out of time for today and will need to continue this discussion next time. I'd like to remind our listeners that we encourage them to email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org.

³ A. Berkeley Mickelsen, *Interpreting the Bible*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974, pp 38-39, also R.C. Sproul, *Knowing Scripture*, 2nd Ed, InterVarsity Press, 2009, pg. 60

⁴ Joel R. Beeke & Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life*, Reformation Heritage Books, 2012, pg. 33