

LION'S ROAR MINISTRIES

How to Study and Interpret the Bible

Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

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How to Study and Interpret the Bible provides:

- practical training in the use of bible study tools and reference materials; and
- an in-depth explanation and application of the ten principles of bible interpretation (hermeneutics).

Students will be familiarized with a variety of bible study tools, reference materials, and online resources. Lessons will include hands-on use of these tools and reference materials through practical exercises and homework assignments.

Please bring an exhaustive concordance (version is not important) with you for class.

How to Study and Interpret the Bible (Principles of Biblical Hermeneutics)

“Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. But shun profane and vain babblings, for they will increase to more ungodliness.”

II Timothy 2:15-16

“Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against you. Blessed are You, O LORD! Teach me Your statutes. With my lips I have declared all the judgments of Your mouth. I have rejoiced in the way of Your testimonies, as much as in all riches. I will meditate on Your precepts, and contemplate Your ways. I will delight myself in Your statutes; I will not forget Your word. Deal bountifully with Your servant, that I may live and keep Your word. Open my eyes, that I may see wondrous things from Your law. I am a stranger in the earth; do not hide Your commandments from me.”

Psalm 119:11-19

I. Introduction:

Hermeneutics is defined as “the science of interpretation; especially, the branch of theology dealing with the principles of exegesis.” **Exegesis** is defined as “explanation, critical analysis, or interpretation of a word, literary passage, etc., especially of the Bible.” Thus hermeneutics is the science of explaining or interpreting the Scriptures in a critical (objective) or non-subjective way.

It is important to note, however, that this science which teaches us the principles, laws, and methods of interpretation is not a perfect science. It is a system devised by men and meant to provide us with important guidelines to help instruct us in the proper interpretation of the Holy Scriptures. For example, Hillel, known as one of the greatest interpreters of the Jews left us several laws of interpretation. Alexandrian Jews adopted the fundamental principle of Plato that one should not believe anything that is unworthy of God. Other men influenced the science of hermeneutics through the years. Though extremely beneficial to us, we need to understand that there is an authority that is higher than the known and commonly accepted hermeneutical principles with regard to the interpreting of Scripture. That higher authority is the Holy Spirit and the Scriptures themselves!

God has provided us with a helper in gaining the true understanding of His Word. That helper is the Holy Spirit. John 14:15-17 says, *“If you love Me, keep my commandments. And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper¹, that He may abide with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you*

¹ Helper is the Greek word “parakletos”, literally, “called to one’s side, i.e., to one’s aid, and is primarily a verbal adjective, which suggests the capability or adaptability for giving aid.... . In its widest sense, it signifies a ... comforter... .”

and will be in you.” Verse 26 says further, “But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will *teach you all things*, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you.” John 16:13 says, “However, when He, the spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come.”

It is absolutely vital for us to acknowledge that in order to properly understand God’s Word we must first be born-again and have His Holy Spirit dwelling with us and dwelling in us to lead us and guide us into all truth! The Bible tells us clearly that our natural or carnal mind, darkened by sin, cannot understand the Scriptures properly. I Corinthians 2:11-14:

*For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we *might know* the things that have been freely given to us by God. These things we also speak, not in words which man’s wisdom teaches but which *the Holy Spirit teaches*, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.”*

Ephesians 4:17-18 further illustrates that until such a time as we are born into the kingdom of light our understanding is darkened. “This I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind, **having their understanding darkened**, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardening of their heart.”

When we are born-again we are delivered out of darkness and into light; into the kingdom of God. We are then able to come to know God himself as Jesus declared in John 17:3: “And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.” Colossians 1:12-14 says, “Giving thanks to the Father who has qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light. He has delivered us from the power of darkness and translated us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins.” When we become disciples of Christ we are given the privilege Jesus promised to His first followers in Matthew 13:10-11, which says, “And the disciples came and said to Him, ‘Why do You speak to them in parables?’ He answered and said to them, ‘Because *it has been given to you to know* the mysteries (secret or hidden truths) of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.’”

A “disciple” means one who is a learner, a pupil. A disciple is sincere, constant, and persevering. Luke 14:26-27 says “If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple.” Disciples are willing to:

- sacrifice or part with what is dear to them if required by the LORD (Abraham parted with his own country and Moses with Pharaoh's court)
- not love relatives more than they love Christ
- not love their own lives more than they love Christ

When seeking to understand how to properly interpret Scripture it is imperative that we have the correct foundation stones in place before we begin building with hermeneutical principles. In review then, those essential foundation stones are:

- being born-again,
- being filled with and guided by the Helper, the Holy Spirit who is given to us to lead and guide us into all truth, and
- being a sincere disciple of Christ

II. **God-given Promises: We Can Know and Understand True Biblical Doctrine — Without Being a Trained Scholar!**

Many, many Scriptures in God's Holy Word assure and encourage us that it is not a requirement that we have graduated from a theological training school in order to be able to understand God's Word. If we have the benefit of such training, that is a wonderful blessing but we must not allow the enemy of our souls to discourage our personal study of God's Word simply because we have not been afforded that opportunity. As disciples of Christ we are those who sit at His feet to learn of Him. As discussed earlier, He has sent to us His Holy Spirit to teach us. And, He has given teachers to the Body of Christ to help us as we grow in the knowledge of His Word and His ways.

Psalm 19:7-8 *"The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, **making wise the simple**; the statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, **enlightening the eyes**;"*

Psalm 119:130 *"The entrance of Your words gives light; **it gives understanding to the simple**."*

Matthew 11:25 *At that time Jesus answered and said, "I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because You have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and **have revealed them to babes**."*

Matthew 13:11 *"...**it has been given to you to know** the mysteries (secret or hidden truths) of the kingdom of heaven..."*

John 7:17 *"If anyone wants to do His will, **he shall know concerning the doctrine**, whether it is from God or whether I speak on My own authority."*

John 8:30-32 “As He spoke these words, many believed in Him. Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, ‘If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And *you shall know the truth*, and the truth shall make you free.’”

John 16:13 “However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, *He will guide you into all truth...*”

Acts 4:13 “Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were *uneducated and untrained* men, they marveled. And they realized that they had been with Jesus.”

I Corinthians 1:26 “For you see your calling, brethren, that *not many wise according to the flesh*, not many mighty, not many noble, are called.”

II Corinthians 11:3 “But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the *simplicity* that is in Christ.”

I Peter 2:2 “As newborn babes, desire the pure *milk of the word*, that you may grow thereby.”

Based upon the encouragement of these Scriptures that **we can understand** the Bible.

III. We can prepare our hearts to receive God’s Word

Ezra 7:10 “For Ezra had *prepared his heart* to seek the Law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel.”

II Chronicles 19:2 “Nevertheless good things are found in you, in that you have removed the wooden images from the land, and have *prepared your heart* to seek God.”

II Chronicles 12:14 “And he did evil, because he *did not prepare his heart* to seek the LORD.”

John 14:23 “Jesus answered and said to him, if anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him.”

IV. Ten Principles of Hermeneutics

1. To properly interpret Scripture we must believe in divine inspiration.

- We must believe that the entire Bible is the Word of God; both Old & New Testament.

- The original authors wrote by God's own breath as they penned the very words of God.

II Timothy 3:16 "*All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction (training, discipline) in righteousness.*"

II Peter 1:21 "*For prophecy never came by (had its origin in) the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved (carried along) by the Holy Spirit.*"

Acts 4:25 "Who by the mouth of Your servant David have said"
or "You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David!"

2. To properly interpret Scripture we must always consider the context!

- look at each verse in the context of the verses that surround it,
- in the context of the book of the Bible the verse is found in (e.g., who it was written to and why), and
- in the context of the whole Bible (e.g., what else does the Bible say about this subject).

3. Always let Scripture interpret Scripture. Interpret a vague passage in light of those that are more clear.

Example: **Philippians 2:12** says, "...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling..." This verse seems to say that it is up to us and our good works to save ourselves, but the verse immediately following that says "For it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure." **Ephesians 2:8-9** says, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast."

By interpreting the vague Scripture in light of those that are very clear, we see that it is not up to us to work it all out in ourselves, but rather God is working in us and through us and it is by His grace, by faith, and by His gift to us that we are saved.

**Review of the first hermeneutical principles we have studied
and a practice exercise we can do together:**

Principle #2: To properly interpret Scripture we must always consider the context.

Principle #3: Always let Scripture interpret Scripture. Interpret a vague passage in light of those that are clear.

Example: John 3:22 and John 4:1-2

Exercise #1: Read Luke 6:38 and explain its meaning.

Luke 6:38 "Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom. For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you."

Luke 6:38 is commonly quoted in relationship to material prosperity. However, on further examination of the context it is apparent that this Scripture is talking primarily of a different subject. The primary principle being emphasized is doing unto others as you would have them do unto you, i.e., the "golden rule." This text is not referring to giving an offering unto the LORD, but rather is referring to what we as children of God should give unto others, especially to our enemies, to those who treat us improperly, and to those who cannot give back to us.

When we compare this verse to the parallel accounts such as Matthew 7:1, 2, & 12 and James 2:13 we see that these passages also reveal the main principle being taught in Luke chapter 6. In Matthew 7:1-2 we see the "measure" of giving is referring to the dispensing of mercy rather than judgment. Matthew 7:12 emphasizes the principle of "doing unto others as you would have them do unto you." For generations, this verse has been referred to as the "golden rule." So, like Luke, Matthew is emphasizing the meting out, or measuring out, of mercy to one another. The cross-reference in James 2:13 is also speaking of the showing, or giving, of mercy rather than judgment.

If we look at the verse immediately preceding Luke 6:38 we will see the subject is the giving of forgiveness to each other rather than judgment and condemnation.

In summary, then, Luke 6:38, though often quoted by those who are receiving offerings unto the LORD, is really speaking primarily of the giving we are to do unto others, especially the giving of mercy and forgiveness, and acts of generosity and kindness that may not be able to be repaid.

This closer look at the context and the other related Scriptures does not however disprove that God does want to bless His people materially. Other Bible verses, such as Deuteronomy 8:18, II Chronicles 1:12, and Proverbs 13:22 do support this truth.

Can we say then, after applying hermeneutical principle #2 and #3, that Luke 6:38 alone should not be lifted out of context and applied toward the giving of offerings unto God? Can we say that it may properly be interpreted to mean that God will touch the hearts of others to give, even money, to us when we are in need if we have freely given unto others?

Further comment regarding principle #3 that Scripture interprets Scripture:

- The dreams, visions, and prophecies found in the book of Daniel are accompanied by the interpretation.
- Often Jesus gave the interpretation of His own parables.

- The Bible uses repetition, emphasis, and specificity in verses that are very literal and meant to be interpreted in that manner.

For example, we see repetition in John 1:3 which says, *“All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made.”*

We see emphasis in Romans 3:10-12, *“As it is written: there is none righteous, no, not one; there is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God. They have all gone out of the way; they have together become unprofitable; there is none who does good, no, not one.”*

Specificity is seen in Revelation 7:4-8, *“Then I heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel. From the tribe of Judah 12,000 were sealed, from the tribe of Reuben 12,000, from the tribe of Gad, 12,000...”*

4. Do not form doctrines from a single passage of Scripture.

In His holy word God has often repeated the concept recorded in Deuteronomy 19:15, *“...by the mouth of two or three witnesses the matter shall be established.”*

Jesus quotes this Old Testament Scripture in Matthew 18:16, *“But if he will not hear you, take with you one or two more, that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.”*

Paul quotes it in II Corinthians 13:1 which says, *“This will be the third time I am coming to you. ‘By the mouth of two or three witnesses every word shall be established.’ ”*

Exercise #2: Read I Timothy 4:10 and tell us what erroneous interpretation one might come up with if we read only that one verse and formed a doctrine from it, disregarding proper hermeneutical principles?

“For to this end we both labor and suffer reproach, because we trust in the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of those who believe.” 1 Tim 4:10 NKJV

This verse makes it sound like all men are going to be saved, regardless of whether they accept the sacrifice of Jesus Christ or not. Is that a sound Biblical doctrine? Are there any Bible verses that would negate that interpretation? Are there any that would support it?

There are, of course, many Scriptures that specify that it is those who believe on Jesus Christ, confessing Him as their Lord and Savior, who are “saved.” For example, Romans 10:9-10 which says, *“That if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes to righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made to salvation.”*

What would be a proper interpretation of I Timothy 4:10? A well accepted commentary on the New Testament, JFB, (Jamieson, Faussett, & Brown), says this: “He is the Saviour of all sufficiently and potentially; of believers alone efficiently and effectually.” In other words, He is **provisionally** the Savior of all mankind. He is in effect the Savior of those who choose to believe!

From this example, we can see the importance of following this hermeneutical principle; and the danger of disregarding it!

5. Always approach Scripture to draw meaning from it [search it] rather than to impose meaning onto it.

It is important that we not approach God’s Word with a presupposed “theology” or “belief” and begin searching for Scriptures to *back up* that belief. The practice of injecting meaning into Scripture is referred as **eisegesis**. Eisegesis is the process of interpreting a text or portion of text in such a way that it introduces one's own presuppositions, agendas, or biases into and onto the text.

For example, at one point in time, it was taught falsely that Jesus was an angel, not the Son of God who is worthy of worship by man and by the angels. By holding onto this belief or doctrine as “gospel truth” one would then begin looking for text to justify that rather than searching the Word to see if it was so as the Berean believers did in Acts 17:11. *“These were more [noble] fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness [of mind], and searched the scriptures daily, to find out whether these things were so.”*

[NOTE: For Biblical truth regarding Christ being superior to the angels, read Hebrews chapter 1.]

The Greek word for “search” in the above text means: to scrutinize, to investigate, interrogate, determine, ask, question, discern, examine, judge, or search. God is not *threatened* when we search His Word! He delights to reveal it to us!

When approached incorrectly, it is far too easy to fall into the trap of twisting Scriptures to say what we *want* them to say as Peter warns in II Peter 3:15-16, *“...-as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which those who are untaught and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures.”*

6. Value the culture, history, and languages of Biblical times.

A wonderful richness of understanding can be gained from having knowledge of customs, peoples, history, and the original languages.

Don Clossom, who has written on the topic of Biblical hermeneutics has this to say with regards to the value of cultural knowledge:

God's plagues on Egypt is one example of how cultural knowledge can help us to understand a text. The specific plagues sent by God spoke directly against the Egyptian gods. Turning the Nile into blood invalidated the protection of Isis, a goddess of the Nile, as well as Khnum, a guardian god of the Nile. The plague of frogs defied the Heqet, the goddess of birth who had the head of a frog. The plague of gnats ridiculed Set, god of the desert. Other plagues mocked Re, a sun god; Hathor, goddess with a cows head; Apis, the bull god; Sekhment, goddess with power over disease, as well as others. God was communicating very clearly with the Egyptian people concerning His role as the creator and sustainer of the universe.

Knowing this history enriches our understanding of the judgments of the LORD and helps us to have a little more insight into why He chose to use these particular plagues.

7. [Always look for the literal interpretation of a verse first, then for figurative meaning.](#)

- Interpreting a passage begins by looking for the simple, literal meaning.
- If there are obvious contradictions of known facts or of truths taught elsewhere in the Scriptures, we should look for the figurative meaning.
- Oftentimes, the context itself will explain figurative language.

For example, how would you interpret Luke 14:26 which says, *"If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple."*

First we look for the literal meaning. Is God really saying to us that we should hate all those who are the closest to us? If we examine the literal Greek word for "hate" we will find that its meaning is "to detest, or to love **less**."

Because we know the overall tenor of Scripture and the many verses that admonish us to love our parents, our husband or wife, our children, and even ourselves, we know that this verse must be speaking figuratively as a stringent literal translation would put it in conflict with much of God's Word! He must be saying, figuratively and comparatively, that we are to love them **less** than we love Him! When our duty to our families comes into conflict with our duty unto Him we must give Christ preference!

The context also supports this figurative/comparative meaning.

8. We must believe that the Bible does not contradict itself.

What may appear to be a contradiction in Scripture is most often a clue that we need our understanding enlightened to the truth being addressed. When comparing two verses that seem to contradict we need to consider that rather than it being “either/or” it may be “both/and”. We may need to dig deeper into the original meanings of words, the history, the culture or the customs of that time.

The following example is from a website of supposed Bible “contradictions”:

Who purchased Joseph, the Ishmaelites or the Midianites? Genesis 37:28, 37:36 and 39:1.

1. **Ishmaelites** ([Genesis 37:28](#)) - *"Then some Midianite traders passed by, so they pulled him up and lifted Joseph out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver. Thus they brought Joseph into Egypt."*
2. **Midianites** ([Genesis 37:36](#)) - *"Meanwhile, the Midianites sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, Pharaoh's officer, the captain of the bodyguard."*
3. **Ishmaelites** ([Genesis 39:1](#)) - *"Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt; and Potiphar, an Egyptian officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the bodyguard, bought him from the Ishmaelites, who had taken him down there."*

According to Achtemeier, Paul J., Th.D., Harper's Bible Dictionary, (San Francisco: Harper and Row, Publishers, Inc.) 1985, the term "Ishmaelite" was synonymous with the term "Midianites." They were probably references to the same general group known to have descended from Abraham. Ishmael was born to Abram through Hagar ([Genesis 16](#)), the handmaiden. The Midianites were descendants of Midian, a son of Abraham and his concubine Keturah ([Genesis 25:1-2](#)). Additionally, "The term 'Midianite' probably identified a confederation of tribes that roamed far beyond this ancestral homeland, a usage that explains the biblical references to Midianites in Sinai, Canaan, the Jordan Valley, Moab, and Transjordan's eastern desert." (Achtemeier, Paul J., Th.D., Harper's Bible Dictionary.)

If this historical research is accurate, there is no contradiction at all in these verses.

9. Proper hermeneutics will always point us to Jesus!

Genesis to Revelation reveal God's plan through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God.

Jesus himself said in John 5:39, *"These are the Scriptures that testify about Me."* and in verse 46, *"If you believe Moses, you would believe Me, for he wrote of Me."*

10. True Bible interpretation should be leading us to a transformed life — a transformation into the image of Christ!

Romans 8:29 says, *“For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren.”*

II Corinthians 3:18 says, *“But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.”*