



Systematic Theology

A study of the major doctrines of Scripture

TOPIC 7 – HERMENEUTICS: BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION
LESSON 129 – PARABLES, PROVERBS, AND PROPHECY

PRINCIPLES OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION – LOUIS BERKHOF
KNOWING SCRIPTURE – RC SPROUL, PGS. 99-113

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Spirit and Letter

- ▶ The Pharisees were quite specific about keeping the letter of the law and also quite prolific at violating the spirit of the law.
- ▶ For example – Sabbath travel laws. The Pharisees (and others) were able to get around the law regarding how far one could travel on the Sabbath by going out during the week and placing personal items under a rock at different intervals along the road, thereby establishing a residence at that location where they could travel to retrieve their personal items and not have gone too far away from home. The letter was obeyed but the spirit totally lost.

Spirit and Letter

- ▶ Types of Legalists in the New Testament:
- ▶ There were those who added rules and regulations beyond what God had commanded. Hence Jesus' rebuke of those who made the traditions of men as authoritative as the Law of Moses.
- ▶ There were those who obeyed the letter while violating the spirit, claiming outward righteousness but revealing inward rebellion and corruption.
- ▶ Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount demonstrates the reality that heart motive matters as much as outward behavior when it comes to obedience or sin.
- ▶ The law has a wider application than just the letter. If you murder someone, you have violated the letter of the law. If you hate them, you have violated the spirit of the law.

Parables

- ▶ Parables are stories based on life situations that help us handle abstract concepts. So why are parables so hard to interpret?
- ▶ First, there is the original intent of the parable. Was the story told to reveal truth or obscure it?
- ▶ Mark 4:10 But when He was alone, those around Him with the twelve asked Him about the parable. 11 And He said to them, “To you it has been given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God; but to those who are outside, all things come in parables, 12 so that ‘Seeing they may see and not perceive, and hearing they may hear and not understand; lest they should turn, and their sins be forgiven them.’ ”

Parables

- ▶ The people did not want to listen to God and instead worshipped idols, so He took away their capacity to see and hear the truth. Idols have eyes but cannot see. They have ears but cannot hear. So to do those who worship them.
- ▶ Note: A parable is not a riddle! It was meant to be understood, at least by those who were open to hearing it and learning from it.
- ▶ Much of the content of parables is about life in the Kingdom of God, and Jesus was speaking to people who had serious misconceptions about what the Kingdom was and what would happen when the Messiah came.
- ▶ Even the disciples had difficulty at times understanding and had to ask questions for a more detailed interpretation of them.

Parables

- ▶ Another question relates to the relationship between a parable and an allegory. Jesus interprets the parable of the sower as an allegory. However, that does not mean every parable is to be interpreted allegorically.
- ▶ To always define a parable as an allegory means that there is a spiritual meaning to be found in the earthly elements of the story. Sometimes this is true, but not all the time. And searching for a spiritual meaning when there is none to be found can be dangerous!
- ▶ Luther wrote, “It is necessary that no one invent mysteries on his own, as some people have done and are still doing.”

Parables

- ▶ The safest way to treat parables is to look for one basic central point in them. As a rule of thumb, avoid allegorizing them except when the New Testament clearly indicates an allegorical meaning.
- ▶ Some parables, like the story of the Prodigal Son, have more than one point. The father, son, and older brother all are used to make different points.
- ▶ Some are comparative stories and others have an obvious moral application, but parables are stories. As such they may or may not have really happened! They may serve as instructive examples and may at times, just be a story to make a point (The Good Samaritan).

Proverbs

- ▶ A common mistake in biblical interpretation and application is to give a proverbial saying the weight and force of a moral absolute (law).
- ▶ Proverbs are “catchy little couplets” designed to express practical truisms. They reflect principles of wisdom for godly living.
- ▶ They do not reflect moral laws that are to be applied absolutely to every conceivable life circumstance.
- ▶ For example: the English proverb – “Look before you leap.” The purpose is to illustrate the need for wisdom in considering the consequences of your actions. Or “He who hesitates is lost.” What if we make both absolute sayings. On the one hand, if we hesitate we are lost, but if we must look before we leap we must hesitate. The conclusion would be “he who hesitates to look before he leaps is lost.” It makes no actual sense.

Proverbs

- ▶ Now let's look at Biblical Proverbs:
- ▶ One of Jesus' wisdom sayings is "He who is not with Me is against Me" (Matt. 12:30). But Jesus also said, "He who is not against you is for you" (Luke 9:50). How can both be true?
- ▶ In some circumstances silence means consent, and in others it indicates hostility.
- ▶ In some cases lack of opposition means support, and in others lack of support indicates opposition.

Proverbs

- ▶ Proverbs 26:4-5 illustrates clearly how Proverbs can be contradictory if taken as absolutes:
- ▶ Do not answer a fool according to his folly, Lest you also be like him.
Answer a fool according to his folly, Lest he be wise in his own eyes.
- ▶ There are times when it is foolish to answer a fool, and there are times when it is wise to answer a fool. Discernment (understanding) is necessary to know when each applies.

Proverbs

- ▶ We also need to understand two types of law that we are given in Scripture: apodictic and casuistic.
- ▶ Apodictic law expresses absolutes and follows a direct personal form such as “You shall” or “You shall not.”
- ▶ Casuistic law is expressed in the “if, then” form. It is a conditional statement.
- ▶ Casuistic law gives a series of examples (case law) that act as guidelines for rendering justice/righteousness.
- ▶ Exodus 23:4 starts with casuistic and ends with apodictic - “If you meet your enemy’s ox or his donkey going astray, you shall surely bring it back to him again.”
- ▶ Does this only apply to oxen and donkeys? The principle is given by example and if we have to list every possibility we’d never be able to write enough laws.

Predictive Prophecy

- ▶ Predictive Prophecy is perhaps the most abused form of Scripture.
- ▶ Naturalistic methodology eliminates it altogether and the higher critical method assumes that the prediction was added to the text after the “fulfillment” had already happened.
- ▶ Some believe that every aspect of the prophecy must be fulfilled to the letter, leaving no room for symbolism or a broader scope of meaning.
- ▶ Some prophecies are fulfilled to the letter – as in Messianic prophecies.
- ▶ Some have a broader scope, like Malachi’s prophecy about the return of Elijah that Christ interprets as the coming of John the Baptist.

Apocalyptic Prophecy

- ▶ Of all forms of prophecy, apocalyptic literature is the most difficult to handle.
- ▶ This type of prophecy has a high level of symbolism and imagery that sometimes is interpreted for us but other times is not.
- ▶ The three most prominent books that fit this category are Daniel, Ezekiel, and Revelation. It helps to look for similar imagery elsewhere in Scripture and examine the context for help understanding the meaning.
- ▶ Interpreting prophecy can be so complex that giving any detailed formula to follow is well beyond the scope of our study. We must always approach this form with care.

Humility

- ▶ Martin Luther observed, “It is remarkable that man should be so arrogant and secure when there are so many, indeed countless, evidences around to suggest that we ought to be humble. Yet our hearts are hard as steel and pay no attention to such evidence.”
- ▶ He also says, “The Holy Scriptures require a humble reader who shows reverence and fear toward the Word of God and constantly says, ‘Teach me, teach me, teach me!’”
- ▶ While we are to study diligently to understand the meaning of Scripture and should believe that our opinions are correct, we must humbly acknowledge the possibility that at some points we could be mistaken. God alone is omniscient. And while His Word is infallible and inerrant, our interpretation of His Word is not.

Knowing Scripture

- ▶ Knowing Scripture is a life-long process which requires diligence and perseverance. Paul encouraged Timothy, “continue in the things you have learned”, reminding him that Scripture is “profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:14, 16).

- ▶ Next week: Lesson 130 – The Culture and Customs of the Bible