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The Mission
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Lesson 16

Well, last if you'll remember we were discussing the barriers to proper interpretation of the Bible. And first one we mentioned was language barriers. Most of the Bible was written in either Hebrew, Greek, or Aramaic . And since we speak English those languages have to be translated. And there's not always a word in the English language that can properly convey the meaning of a word in the language in which it was originally written. And so the English text sometimes leaves us a long way from a complete understanding. That's why we also use Bible dictionaries and other similar resources when we study.

And then we talked about cultural barriers, which are similar to language barriers. We live in a very different culture than those we read about in the scriptures. And so to appreciate what's going on in Scripture, we have to learn about how they communicated back then. And also other areas such as transportation, trade, agriculture, and how they made their living, and so forth.

And then of course we have the many different types and kinds of writings which we call literary barriers. Not all writings are interpreted in the same way. There are different rules if you will we have to apply to a writing depending on what category it fits.

And then we have communication barriers. We can't always know what's going on in someone else's mind. And sometimes we have to make assumptions that may or may not be completely accurate.

And like we learned last time, we'll never be able to answer every question we have when it comes to the word of God.

And then lastly is the problem of faulty interpretation which I saved for tonight.

Now, I want to give you six things to watch out for as you read and study the Scriptures.

The first one and we've talked about this before is to misread the text or not read the entire text. You'll never gain a proper understanding of Scripture if you don't read the text properly.

If Jesus says, "I am **the** way" (John 14:6), but you read it as, "I am **a** way," then you're misreading the text. If Paul writes, "For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil" (1 Timothy 6:10), but you read it as, "Money is the root of all evil," then you are misreading the text. If the psalmist cries, "Delight yourself in the Lord; and He will give you the desires of your heart" (Psalm 37:4), but all you pay attention to is the first part which says, "He will give you the desires of your heart," then you are misreading the text.

That's why we said at the very beginning of this study that if you want to study God's Word, you've got to learn to read. There is no other way. And ignorance of what the text says is the unpardonable sin of Interpretation. It shows that you really haven't done your homework. And you've skipped the most important and first step in Bible study, which is what? Observation!

The second problem we need to be aware of is distorting the text. If you've ever had some of these folks that come around in white shirts and black ties and knock on your door and want to come in and talk to you about Jesus; if you give them a chance; they're going to take the scriptures and they're going to do what I'm warning you about. They're going to distort the text and make it say what they want it to say rather than what God intended it to say.

And apparently it's nothing new. Even Peter ran into the same problem in the early church. In **2 Peter 3:15 he wrote, and consider that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation—as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, 16 as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures.**

And then he continues with a warning. He says,

17 You therefore, beloved, since you know this beforehand, beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked;

You see, it's one thing to struggle with the interpretation of a text; but it's another thing to just out and out distort the meaning of it. And it's a serious offense and something God will bring to judgment. And so we need to be very careful and diligent to learn how to properly interpret Scripture.

Now, there's another error we see on occasion and it's even worse than distorting the text. And that's to contradict the word of God. When a person does that, they're in essence calling God a liar.

And a classic illustration of that is when Satan in the Garden of Eden, said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden’?”

And then the woman said to the serpent, “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’ ”

And then the serpent said to the woman. **“You will not surely die,” And that’s in Genesis chapter 3, verses 1–4.**

And that’s a direct contradiction of God’s Word as it’s written in **Genesis chapter 2, verses 16 & 17.** And so Satan’s been lying from the very beginning, and he is still lying today encouraging people to do the same thing he encouraged Adam and Eve to do, which was to contradict what God has plainly said.

And then another thing we need to watch out for is subjectivism, which is when people say things like, “This is what I think it means.” Or “This what I feel like it means.” In other words, their Bible study is totally subjective. They wander around the Scriptures, just looking for something they can personally connect with. And their emotions override the truth.

Another error in interpretation to look for is relativism. Some people approach a text assuming that the Bible changes meaning over time. That a text somehow meant one thing when it was written, but now it means something else. In other words, its meaning is relative.

Take the resurrection of Jesus as an example. There is no other credible explanation for how Jesus disciples behaved after His ascension to heaven, than that they sincerely believed He had risen bodily from that

tomb. Nobody undergoes the persecution they endured and eventually gives their life for a cause unless they sincerely believe in that cause.

That's in essence what Paul was saying in **1 Corinthians 15:12, 12 Now if Christ is preached that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? 13 But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not risen. 14 And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty. 15 Yes, and we are found false witnesses of God, because we have testified of God that He raised up Christ, whom He did not raise up—if in fact the dead do not rise. 16 For if the dead do not rise, then Christ is not risen. 17 And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins! 18 Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. 19 If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable.**

But today, some teachers have changed Paul's meaning. And they say, yes, he's talking about a resurrection, but it wasn't a physical resurrection; it was a spiritual resurrection.

It doesn't matter to them whether Jesus actually got up and walked out of that tomb or not. They say, what's important is that He lives in your heart. That's relativism.

And when we get to the Application step, we're going to see that a passage of scripture can have any number of practical implications. But it can only have one proper interpretation. There's only one meaning—which is the meaning it had to the original writer. And we have to properly reconstruct his message if we want an accurate understanding.

Another error in interpretation is overconfidence.

In Bible study, just as in life, pride goes before a fall. And the minute you think you've mastered a portion of Scripture, you're setting yourself up for a fall.

Why?

Because knowledge puffs up! That's 1 Corinthians 8:1.

And if you're not careful it can make you not only arrogant, but unteachable. And some of the worst abuses of doctrine occur when somebody sets themselves up as the ultimate authority on a particular text.

Some people have been studying Scripture all of their lives and they'll be the first to tell you that the process of interpretation never ends. And so don't expect that when you come to the Bible and you spend a half-hour or even a few hours on a particular text that you're going to walk away with all the answers.

Now, that doesn't mean you shouldn't come to conclusions about what the text means, or that you can't feel confident in what you believe. But you just remember that the process of Interpretation never ends. And you can never come to the end of a study and say, "Well, I've got that one down and I know all there is to know about that passage."

Now, that said, let me stress to you one more thing.

Even though a Bible passage ultimately has only one correct interpretation, you're always going to find Christians who disagree with you about what that interpretation ought to be. And as frustrating as that might be, it's going to happen.

It's kind of like two people who witness the exact same bank robbery. When they get to court chances are they're going to describe it in completely different terms.

And so differences in interpretation are inevitable; and we just need to keep in mind that the conflict is not in the text or with the text. The conflict is with our limited understanding of the text.

God's not at all confused about what He has said, even if we are.

So sometimes we'll just have to agree to disagree and move on; keeping in mind our responsibility to be as faithful and accurate to the text as we know how.

In 2 Timothy 2:15, Paul says, Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.