

READING THE LAW & SCRIPTURES

By Charles Mwewa

One day an expert in the law stood up to test Him. "Teacher," he asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" "What is written in the Law?" Jesus replied. "How do you read it?" He answered, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind' and 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" You have answered correctly," Jesus said. "Do this and you will live." (Luke 10:25-28).

Introduction

"How do you read it?" And not just what or why we read the Bible is important. Under the common-law system, at the heart of justice, law, and truth, are the rules of construction known as statutory interpretation. Similarly, at the heart of the discovery of truth in the Bible is scriptural interpretation. Both are the methods of investigation of truth. And in this sermon, we highlight the purpose of scriptural interpretation by drawing upon three rules of statutory interpretation, namely: Mischief rule; plain meaning rule; and golden rule. The points will be dealt with in that order before a conclusive application is drawn, followed by a related prayer.

1. Mischief Rule

The mischief is the gap existing before the law and after it was passed. The role of the judge is to discover the mischief the legislature intended to cover by enacting the particular statute. The *Heydon's Case*¹ is cited as the first case to set a precedent on mischief rule of judicial statutory interpretation. It set a four-prong test, as follows: What the common-law was before enacting the statute; what mischief and defect were for which the common-law had been provided; the remedy Parliament had intended to resolve; and the true reason for the remedy.

Christ has pointed out the mischief that Scriptures intended to discover or the gap it intended to fill; all scriptures point to Jesus: "You search the Scriptures because you think they give you eternal life. But the Scriptures point to me!"² Christ does not dispute that Scriptures contain eternal life. He merely clarifies that eternal life is in Him. Indeed, Scriptures point to Christ who is both eternal life and the source of it. Answering the expert in the law, Christ points to Himself as the possessor and granter of eternal life. The greatest commandment, therefore, can be summed up as loving Jesus. And this is illustrative as: "Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me. The one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love them and show myself to them."³ Mere stating that one loves Jesus or God is not enough, one should do the will of Jesus or God: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven."⁴ Jesus, is the link between the old law and the new covenant. Just like a Judge has to suppress a mischief and advance a remedy through the rules of construction, a diligent believer needs to dig deeper than simply browsing on what is written. The deeper one digs in Scripture, the better the chances of discovering the truth – which is Christ. Indeed, Christ is the remedy for sin and damnation.

¹ (1584) 76 ER 637

² John 5:39

³ John 14:21

⁴ Matthew 7:21

2. Plain Meaning Rule

Merriam-Webster online dictionary defines the Plain Meaning Rule as, “A rule in statute or contract interpretation: when the language is unambiguous and clear on its face the meaning of the statute or contract must be determined from the language of the statute or contract and not from extrinsic evidence.”⁵ To utilize this rule, the text is key – justice must be done in understanding the text itself without any external assistance, such as using a concordance or dictionary. After Paul and Silas preached, the Bereans went back and re-examined the texts to unlock what Paul and Silas preached: “And the people of Berea were more open-minded than those in Thessalonica, and they listened eagerly to Paul’s message. They searched the Scriptures day after day to see if Paul and Silas were teaching the truth.”⁶

The Plain Meaning Rule is enshrined in a hermeneutical device of scripture interpreting scripture, just like one statutory provision may be used to interpret another provision. Pete Lange writes: “So, what do we really mean when we say, ‘Scripture interprets Scripture?’ In short, it means that as we engage in hermeneutics (the art of interpretation), we interpret the implicit by the explicit and the cloudy through the clear.”⁷

3. The Golden Rule

The golden rule of statutory interpretation was defined in the *Adamson Case*, wherein it could be applied where an application of the literal rule would lead to an absurdity. The Courts may then apply a secondary meaning.⁸ When mere mechanical and grammatical meaning words in a statute may not be sufficient to secure justice, Courts often modify the literal rules in order to cure the ambiguity and absurdity. This may also be construed as contextual analysis of the statute. Words require context to be understood. Context may be what existed during the enactment process.

The Golden Rule may be relevant to biblical and scriptural interpretation. However, caution must be had in view of the restriction offered in the Bible: “Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation of things.”⁹ Indeed, certain events and concepts that may require interpretation may not have existed when the Bible was written. In those circumstances the Golden Rule may come handy. The caveat always lies in overstretching or under-stretching the principles. Issues of contemporary nuances such as abortion, same-sex marriage, technology, and even practices like tithing which existed in the agrarian economy, may be dealt with using the Golden Rule. And the golden authority for such is in this verse, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness...”¹⁰ Thus, the inspiration that is inherent in Scriptures is necessary to the correct interpretation of the Word of God.

In 1938, John Willis published an article called, “Statutory Interpretation in a Nutshell”¹¹ In that article, Willis asserts, “Although judges purport to apply them [statutory interpretations], in fact outcomes are determined

⁵ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/> (assessed on February 16th, 2021)

⁶ Acts 17:11

⁷ Pete Lange, “Scripture Interprets Scripture: What Does this Mean?” 1517.org, June 24th, 2020

⁸ *River Wear Commissioners v Adamson*, (1876-77) L.R. 2 App Cas 743.

⁹ 2 Peter 1:20

¹⁰ 2 Timothy 3:16

¹¹ (1939) 16 Can. Bar Rev. I

by the politics and arbitrary preferences of the presiding judge.”¹² This is in reaction to the realistic view of legal philosophizing. However, a truth that should not be overlooked is in the limitation imposed in temporal exegesis, both in legal Courts and in the church. In law, two philosophies have emerged, positivism and judicial interventionism. The former is an approach to the interpretation of law that states that the meaning to be given to the words in legal rules should be the ordinary, dictionary meaning without resorting to social, economic, or political values to aid in interpretation. And the later is an approach to the interpretation of law that draws on social, economic, and political values in interpreting the meaning and application of legal rules and principles.

Lying in between these two schools of thought, truth may be lost, sacrificed, or even averted. It is for this reason that in scriptural interpretation, emphasis should be had to the adherence to the Spirit’s inspiration and instruction. Many are the times, being human, judges have acquitted the guilty, and even punished the innocent. If this is taken into scriptural distinctions, it might mean misleading the church into false doctrines and misplaced interpretations of God’s Word, leading to serious eternal consequences, such as loss of Heaven or fall from grace.¹³ Christ never shunned the efficacy of the Scriptures, both in the Old and New Testaments: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”¹⁴ And, indeed, “He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”¹⁵

Conclusion & Application

Those who preach or judge have a very high burden placed upon them. They have both the power and opportunity to interpret the Scriptures and the law, respectively. Both the Scriptures and the law contain the truth, but this can be missed or even abused. Because of this weakness, both those who are lawyering before judicial magistrates and those who listen to sermons must exercise due diligence in searching the truth. The burden is not only on those who judge or preach, but also on those who are judged (through their lawyers) and those who listen to sermons to making sure that they have done their duty in searching the truth through the law and Scriptures, respectively. The deceiver and the deceived will both be punished. This is what is meant by the verses, “Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly,”¹⁶ and “My people are destroyed from lack of knowledge.”¹⁷ You read your Bible and listen to your pastors, but Jesus asks, “How do you read it?”

Related Prayer

There are wolves in sheep’s clothing, Oh, Lord, show us;
It’s only in the full revelation, the full knowledge of Jesus;
That our safety and security clearly fit into divine glory;
May we not be dupes of Satan’s machinations and gory.

In the name of Jesus, our Lord,
Amen

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ See Galatians 5:4

¹⁴ Matthew 5:17

¹⁵ Colossians 1:17

¹⁶ James 3:1

¹⁷ Hosea 4:6