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The Disciple-Making Minister

Biblical Principles for Fruitfulness and Multiplication

By David Servant

Chapter Seven

Biblical Interpretation

Paul wrote to Timothy:

Pay close attention to *yourself* and to *your teaching*; persevere in these things; for as you do this you will insure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you (1 Tim. 4:16, emphasis added).

Every minister should take this admonition to heart, paying close attention, first of all, to *himself*, making certain that he is setting an example of godliness.

Second, he should pay close attention to his *teaching*, because his eternal salvation and the eternal salvation of those who listen to him are dependent on what he teaches, just as Paul wrote in the above-quoted verse.¹ If a minister embraces false doctrine or neglects to tell people the truth, the result can be eternally disastrous for him and others.

There is no excuse, however, for the disciple-making minister to teach false doctrine, as God has given him the Holy Spirit and His Word to guide him into the truth. In contrast, ministers with wrong motives often merely parrot the popular teachings of others, not studying the Word for themselves, and are apt to err in their doctrine and teaching. The safeguard against this is for the minister to purify his heart, making certain that his motive is to (1) please God and (2) help people be prepared to stand before Jesus, rather than to become personally wealthy, powerful or popular. Additionally, he must diligently study God's Word so that he has a thorough and balanced understanding of it. Paul also wrote to Timothy,

Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth (2 Tim. 2:15).

Reading, studying and meditating on God's Word should be a discipline that a minister practices continually. The Holy Spirit will help him better understand God's Word as he diligently studies, thus insuring that he will "handle accurately the word of truth." One of the greatest problems in the church today is that ministers misinterpret God's Word and consequently mislead the people they teach. This can be quite serious. James warned,

¹ Obviously, Paul didn't believe in unconditional eternal security, otherwise he would not have told Timothy, a saved person, that he needed to do something in order to insure his salvation.

Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we shall incur a stricter judgment (Jas. 3:1).

For this reason it is imperative that the disciple-making minister knows how to rightly interpret the Word of God, with the goal of accurately understanding and communicating the intending meaning of any given text.

Rightly interpreting God's Word is done the same way as rightly interpreting anyone else's words. If we want to understand accurately the intended meaning of any author or speaker, we must apply certain rules of interpretation, rules that are based on common sense. In this chapter, we will consider the three most important rules of sound Bible interpretation. They are, (1) *Read intelligently*, (2) *Read contextually*, and (3) *Read honestly*.

Rule #1: Read intelligently. Interpret what you read literally unless it is obviously intended to be understood as figurative or symbolic.

Scripture, like all literature, is full of figures of speech, such a *metaphors*, *hyperboles* and *anthropomorphisms*. They should be taken as such.

A *metaphor* is a comparison of similarities between two basically dissimilar things. Scripture contains many metaphors. One can be found in Christ's words during the Last Supper:

And while they were eating, Jesus took some bread, and after a blessing, He broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is My body." And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins" (Matt. 26:26-28).

Did Jesus mean that the bread He gave His disciples was *literally* His body and that the wine they drank was *literally* His blood? Common sense tells us *No*. Scripture plainly says that it was bread and wine that Jesus gave them, and it says nothing about them changing, literally, into flesh and blood at any point in time. Neither Peter nor John, present at the Last Supper, ever reported such a thing in their epistles, and it is very unlikely that the disciples would have had an easy time of playing the part of cannibals!

Some argue, "But Jesus said that the bread and wine were His body and blood, so I'm going to believe what Jesus said!"

Jesus also once said that He was the door (see John 10:9). Did He literally become a door with hinges and a doorknob? Jesus once said that He was the vine and that we are the branches (see John 15:5). Did Jesus literally become a grape vine? Have we literally become vine branches? Jesus once said that He was light of the world and the bread that came down out of heaven (see John 9:5; 6:41). Is Jesus also the sunlight and a loaf of bread?

Clearly, all of these expressions are figures of speech called *metaphors*, a comparison of two things that are basically dissimilar but which share some similarities. In some ways, Jesus was *like* a door and a grape vine. Jesus' statements at the Last Supper are obvious metaphors as well. The wine was *like* His blood (in some ways). The bread was *like* His body (in some ways).

Christ's Parables

Christ's parables are *similes*, which are the same as metaphors, but similes always include the word *like*, *as* or *so*. They teach spiritual lessons also by comparing similarities between two things that are essentially dissimilar. That is an important point to remember as we interpret them; otherwise we may make the error of looking for significance in each little detail of every parable. Metaphors and similes always reach a place where the

similarities end and the dissimilarities begin. For example, if I say to my wife, "Your eyes are like pools," I mean that her eyes are blue, deep and inviting. I don't mean that fish swim in them, that birds land on them, and that they freeze over with ice during the winter.

Let us consider three of Jesus' parables, all similes, the first being the Parable of the Dragnet:

The kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet cast into the sea, and gathering fish of every kind; and when it was filled, they drew it up on the beach; and they sat down, and gathered the good fish into containers, but the bad they threw away. So it will be at the end of the age; the angels shall come forth, and take out the wicked from among the righteous, and will cast them into the furnace of fire; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt. 13:47-50).

Are the kingdom of heaven and a dragnet *basically* the same? Absolutely not! They are *very much* different, but there are a *few* similarities. Just as fish are judged and separated into two categories, desirable and undesirable, when pulled from a dragnet, so it will be in God's kingdom. One day the wicked and the righteous, who are currently living together, will be separated. But that is where the similarities end. *Fish* swim; *people* walk. *Fishermen* separate fish. *Angels* will separate the wicked from the righteous. *Fish* are judged by how good they taste after they are cooked. *People* are judged by their obedience or disobedience to God. *Good fish* are put into containers and *bad fish* are thrown away. *Righteous people* inherit God's kingdom and *wicked people* are cast into hell.

This parable is a perfect example of how every metaphor and simile is ultimately an imperfect comparison because the things being compared are basically dissimilar. We don't want to go beyond the intention of the speaker, assuming that dissimilarities are actually similarities. For example, we all know that "good fish" actually end of being cooked in fire, and "bad fish" go back into the water to swim another day. Jesus didn't mention that! It would have worked against His purpose.

This particular parable does not teach (regardless of what anyone says) a strategy of "dragnet evangelism," where we try to drag everyone into the church, good and bad, whether they want to come or not! This parable does not teach that the beach is the best place to witness. This parable does not prove that the Rapture of the church occurs at the end of the tribulation period. This parable does not teach that our salvation is purely God's sovereign choice because the chosen fish in the parable had nothing to do with the reason for their selection. Don't force unwarranted significance into Jesus' parables!

Remaining Ready

Here is another familiar parable of Jesus, the Parable of the Ten Virgins:

Then the kingdom of heaven will be comparable to [is like] ten virgins, who took their lamps, and went out to meet the bridegroom. And five of them were foolish, and five were prudent. For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, but the prudent took oil in flasks along with their lamps. Now while the bridegroom was delaying, they all got drowsy and began to sleep. But at midnight there was a shout, "Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him." Then all those virgins rose, and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the prudent, "Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out." But the prudent answered, saying, "No, there will not be enough for us and you too; go instead to the dealers and buy some for yourselves." And while they were going away to make the purchase, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding feast; and the door was shut. And later the other virgins also came, saying, "Lord, lord, open up for us." But he answered and said, "Truly I say to you, I do not know you." Be on the alert then, for

you do not know the day nor the hour (Matt. 25:1-13).

What is the primary lesson of this parable? It is found in the final sentence: *Stay ready for the return of the Lord, because He might delay longer than you expect.* That's about it.

As I mentioned in a previous chapter, Jesus spoke this parable to some of His closest disciples (see Matt. 24:3; Mark 13:3), who were obviously obediently following Him at that time. So clearly implied in this parable is the fact that it was possible for Peter, James, John and Andrew *not* to be ready when Jesus returned. That is why Jesus was warning them. Thus this parable teaches there is a possibility that those who are currently ready for Christ's return may not be ready when He actually does return. All ten virgins were *initially* ready, but five became *unready*. Had the bridegroom returned sooner, all ten would have gained entrance into the wedding feast.

But what is the significance of there being *five* foolish and *five* wise virgins? Does that prove that only one-half of professing believers will be ready when Christ returns? No.

What is the significance of the oil? Does it represent the Holy Spirit? No. Does it reveal to us that only those who have been baptized in the Holy Spirit will make it into heaven? No.

Does the bridegroom's returning at midnight reveal that Jesus will return at midnight? No.

Why didn't the bridegroom ask the wise virgins to identify their foolish friends at the door? If the bridegroom had asked the wise to identify the foolish, it would have ruined the entire point of the parable, as the foolish would have ultimately gained entrance.

Perhaps it could be said that just as the foolish virgins no longer had light and went to sleep, so foolish believers begin to walk in spiritual darkness and go to sleep spiritually, thus ultimately leading to their condemnation. *Perhaps* a similarity could be found in the wedding feast of the parable and the future wedding feast of the Lamb, but that is about as far as one can go without forcing meaning into this parable or its various details.

Bearing Fruit

Perhaps the absolute worst interpretation I've ever heard of one of Christ's parables was one preacher's explanation of the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares. First, let's read that parable:

He presented another parable to them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to [is like] a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed tares also among the wheat, and went away. But when the wheat sprang up and bore grain, then the tares became evident also. And the slaves of the landowner came and said to him, "Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?" And he said to them, "An enemy has done this!" And the slaves said to him, "Do you want us, then, to go and gather them up?" But he said, "No; lest while you are gathering up the tares, you may root up the wheat with them. Allow both to grow together until the harvest; and in the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, 'First gather up the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them up; but gather the wheat into my barn'" (Matt. 13:24-30).

Now here was that certain preacher's explanation:

It is a fact that when wheat and tares sprout, they look identical. No one can tell if they are wheat or tares. That is just how it is in the world and in the church. No one can tell who are the true Christians and who are the unbelievers. They cannot be identified by how they live their lives, because many Christians are not obeying Christ anymore than unbelievers. Only God knows their hearts, and He will sort them out in the end.

That, of course, is not the point of the Parable of the Wheat and Tares! In reality, it teaches that believers are indeed *very* distinguishable from non-believers. Notice that the slaves realized that tares had been planted when the wheat bore grain (see v. 26). Tares don't bear any fruit, and that is how they are easily identified as tares. I think it is significant that Jesus chose the *fruitless* tares to represent the wicked who will be gathered in the end and cast into hell.

The primary points of this parable are plain: *The truly saved bear fruit; the unsaved do not. Although God is not judging the wicked yet as they live among the saved, one day He will separate them from the righteous and cast them into hell.*

Jesus actually provided an explanation of this particular parable, so there is no need for anyone to search for any significance beyond what He explained:

The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man, and the field is the world; and as for the good seed, these are the sons of the kingdom; and the tares are the sons of the evil one; and the enemy who sowed them is the devil, and the harvest is the end of the age; and the reapers are angels. Therefore just as the tares are gathered up and burned with fire, so shall it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send forth His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of fire; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear (Matt. 13:36-43).

Hyperbole

A second common figure of speech found within the Bible is *hyperbole*. A hyperbole is a deliberate exaggeration made for emphasis. When a mother tells her child, "I called you a thousand times to come home for dinner," that is hyperbole. An example of a hyperbole in the Bible would be Jesus' statement about cutting off your right hand:

And if your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off, and throw it from you; for it is better for you that one of the parts of your body perish, than for your whole body to go into hell (Matt. 5:30).

If Jesus literally meant that every one of us who sins in some way by using our right hand should cut that hand off, then all of us should be missing our right hands! Of course, the problem with sin is not really in our hands. More than likely, Jesus was teaching us that sin can send us to hell, and the way to avoid sin is to remove temptations and those things which cause us to stumble.

Anthropomorphism

A third figure of speech that we encounter within Scripture is *anthropomorphism*. Anthropomorphism is a metaphorical expression where human attributes are ascribed to God for the sake of helping us understand Him. For example, we read in Genesis 11:5:

And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower which the sons of men had built (Gen. 11:5).

This is a probable anthropomorphism because it seems unlikely that the all-knowing God literally had to journey from heaven down to Babel to investigate what people were building!

Many biblical scholars consider every biblical statement that describes parts of God's body, such as His arms, hands, nose, eyes and hair, to be anthropomorphisms. Surely, they

say, almighty God does not actually have such parts as humans do.

I would disagree, however, for a number of reasons. First, because Scripture plainly teaches that *we* have been created in *God's* image and likeness:

Then God said, "Let Us make man in *Our image, according to Our likeness*" (Gen. 1:26, emphasis added).

Some would say we are created in God's image and likeness only in the sense that we possess self-awareness, moral responsibility, the capacity to reason and so on. However, let us read a statement that is very similar to Genesis 1:26, one that occurs just a few chapters later:

When Adam had lived one hundred and thirty years, he became the father of a son *in his own likeness, according to his image*, and named him Seth (Gen. 5:3, emphasis added).

This surely means that Seth was similar in physical appearance to his father. If that is what it means in Genesis 5:3, certainly the identical expression means the same thing in Genesis 1:26. Common sense and sound interpretation say that it does.

Furthermore, we have some descriptions of God by biblical authors who saw Him. For example, Moses, along with seventy-three other Israelites, saw God:

Then Moses went up with Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and *they saw the God of Israel*; and under *His feet* there appeared to be a pavement of sapphire, as clear as the sky itself. Yet He did not stretch out *His hand* against the nobles of the sons of Israel; and *they beheld God*, and they ate and drank (Ex. 24:9-11).

If you had asked Moses if God had hands and feet, what would he have said?²

The prophet Daniel also had a vision of God the Father *and* God the Son:

I kept looking until thrones were set up, and the Ancient of Days [God the Father] *took His seat*; His vesture was like white snow, and *the hair of His head* like pure wool. His throne was ablaze with flames, its wheels were a burning fire. A river of fire was flowing and coming out from before Him; thousands upon thousands were attending Him, and myriads upon myriads were standing before Him; the court sat, and the books were opened....I kept looking in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven one like a Son of Man [God the Son] was coming, and He came up to the Ancient of Days and was presented before Him. And to Him was given dominion, glory and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations, and men of every language might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away; and His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed (Dan. 7:9-10, 13-14).

If you had asked Daniel if God had white hair and had a form whereby He was able to sit on a throne, what would he have said?

All of this being so, I'm convinced that God the Father has a glorious form that is somewhat similar to the form of a human being, although He is not made of flesh and blood, but is a spirit (see John 4:24).

How can you discern which portions of Scripture are meant to be interpreted literally and which should be interpreted figuratively or symbolically? That should be easy for

² Moses also once also saw God's back as He "walked by." God held His hand in such a way so as to block Moses from seeing His face; see Ex. 33:18-23.

anyone who can reason logically. Interpret everything literally unless there is no other intelligent alternative than to interpret what is written figuratively or symbolically. The Old Testament prophets and the book of Revelation, for example, are clearly full of symbolism, some of which is explained, some of which is not. But the symbolisms are not difficult to identify.

Rule #2: Read *contextually*. Every passage must be interpreted in light of the surrounding passages and the entire Bible. The historical and cultural context should also be considered whenever possible.

Reading scriptures without taking into consideration their immediate and biblical context is perhaps the primary cause of misinterpretation.

It is possible to make the Bible say anything you want it to say by isolating scriptures from their context. For example, did you know that the Bible says that God doesn't exist? In Psalm 14 we read, "There is no God" (Ps. 14:1). If we want to interpret those words accurately, however, we must read them within their context: "*The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God'*" (Ps. 14:1, emphasis added). Now this verse takes on a whole different meaning!

Another example: I once heard a preacher give a sermon on the Christians' need to be "baptized in fire." He began his sermon by reading the words of John the Baptist from Matthew 3:11: "As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."

Based on this one verse, he built a sermon. I remember his saying, "Just because you are baptized in the Holy Spirit, that is not enough! Jesus also wants to baptize you in fire, just like John the Baptist proclaimed!" He went on to explain that once we had been "baptized in fire," we would be full of zeal to work for the Lord. Finally he had an altar call for people who wanted to be "baptized in fire."

Unfortunately, that particular preacher had made the classic mistake of taking a scripture out of its context.

What did John the Baptist mean when he said that Jesus would baptize with fire? To find the answer, all we need to do is read the two verses before that verse, and one verse after it. Let's begin with the two preceding verses. There John said:

And do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, "We have Abraham for our father"; for I say to you, that God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. And the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and *thrown into the fire* (Matt. 3:9-10, emphasis added).

We first learn that at least part of John's audience that day consisted of Jews who thought their salvation was based upon their lineage. Thus, John's sermon was evangelistic.

We also learn that John was warning that unsaved people are in danger of being *cast into the fire*. It would seem reasonable to conclude that "the fire" of which John spoke in verse 10 is the same fire of which he spoke in verse 11.

This fact becomes even clearer when we read verse 12:

"And His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, *but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire*" (Matt. 3:12, emphasis added).

In both verses 10 and 12, the fire of which John was speaking was the fire of hell. In verse 12, he metaphorically states that Jesus will divide people into two groups—wheat,

which He will “gather into the barn,” and chaff, which He will burn up “with unquenchable fire.”

In light of the surrounding verses, John must have meant in verse 11 that Jesus will baptize people *either* with the Holy Spirit, if they are believers, or with fire, if they are unbelievers. Since that is the case, no one should preach to Christians that they need to be baptized in fire!

Moving beyond the immediate context of these verses, we should also look to the rest of the New Testament. Can we find an example in the book of Acts where Christians are said to have been “baptized in fire”? No. The closest thing is Luke’s description of the day of Pentecost when the disciples were baptized in the Holy Spirit and tongues of fire temporarily appeared over their heads. But Luke never says that this was a “baptism in fire.” Moreover, can we find an exhortation or any instruction in the epistles for Christians to be “baptized in fire”? No. Therefore, it is quite safe to conclude that no Christian should be seeking a baptism in fire.

A False Gospel Derived From Scripture

Oftentimes the gospel itself is misrepresented by preachers and teachers who, because they fail to consider context, misinterpret Scripture. False teaching regarding God’s grace abounds for this very reason.

For example, Paul’s statement about salvation being a product of grace and not works, found in Ephesians 2:8, has been abused to promote a false gospel, all because context has been ignored. Paul wrote:

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 (Eph. 2:8-9).

Many focus exclusively on Paul’s statements about salvation being by grace, a gift, and not a result of works. From that, contrary to the testimony of hundreds of scriptures, they derive that there is no connection between salvation and holiness. Some even go so far to say that repentance is therefore not necessary for salvation to occur. This is a classic example of how Scripture is misinterpreted because context is ignored.

First, let us consider what the actual passage under consideration says in its *entirety*. Paul does *not* say that we have been *saved by grace*, but that we have been *saved by grace through faith*. Faith is every bit as much a part of the salvation equation as is grace. Scripture declares that faith without works is useless, dead, and cannot save (see Jas. 2:14-26). Thus Paul is not teaching that holiness is irrelevant in salvation. He is saying that our own efforts are not what save us; the basis of our salvation is God’s grace. We could never be saved without God’s grace, but it is only as we respond to God’s grace with faith that salvation actually occurs in our lives. The result of salvation is always obedience, the fruit of genuine faith. By looking at the context no further away than the very next verse, this is substantiated. Paul says:

For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them (Eph. 2:10).

The whole reason we have been regenerated by the Holy Spirit, now new creations in Christ, was so we could walk in good works of obedience. Thus Paul’s salvation equation looks like this:

Grace + Faith = Salvation + Obedience

That is, grace plus faith equals (or results in) salvation plus obedience. When God’s grace is responded to in faith, the result is always salvation and good works.

Yet those who have ripped Paul's words from their context have concocted a formula like this:

Grace + Faith – Obedience = Salvation

That is, grace plus faith without (or minus) obedience equals (or results in) salvation. That is heresy as far as the Bible is concerned.

If we read just a little more of the context of Paul's words, we also soon discover that the situation in Ephesus was the same as it was just about everywhere Paul preached. That is, Jews were teaching Paul's new Gentile converts that they had to be circumcised and keep some of the ceremonial aspects of the Mosaic Law if they wanted to be saved. It was within the context of circumcision and ceremonial works that Paul had in mind when he wrote about the "works" that don't save us (see Eph. 2:11-22).

If we read just a little further, taking in more of the context of Paul's entire letter to the Ephesians, we see very clearly that Paul believed that holiness was essential for salvation:

But do not let immorality or any impurity or greed even be named among you, as is proper among saints; and there must be no filthiness and silly talk, or coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks. *For this you know with certainty, that no immoral or impure person or covetous man, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience* (Eph. 5:3-6, emphasis added).

If Paul believed that God's grace would ultimately save someone who was unrepentantly immoral, impure or covetous, he would never have written those words. Paul's intended meaning of his words recorded in Ephesians 2:8-9 can only be rightly understood in the context of his entire letter to the Ephesians.

The Galatian Fiasco

Paul's words in his letter to the Galatians have been similarly interpreted out of their context. The result has been the distortion of the gospel, the very thing that Paul was hoping to correct in his letter to the Galatians.

The entire theme of Paul's letter to the Galatians is "Salvation by faith, and not by works of the Law." But did Paul intend that his readers would conclude that holiness was not necessary to gain entrance into God's kingdom? Certainly not.

First, we note that Paul was once again combating Jews who had come to Galatia and were teaching the new converts that they could not be saved unless they were circumcised and kept the Law of Moses. Paul mentions the particular issue of circumcision repeatedly in his letter, as that seems to have been the primary emphasis of the Jewish legalists (see Gal. 2:3, 7-9, 12; 5:2-3, 6, 11; 6:12-13, 15). Paul was not concerned that the Galatian believers were becoming too obedient to Christ's commandments; he was concerned that they were no longer placing their faith in Christ for their salvation, but in circumcision and in their own feeble efforts at keeping the Mosaic Law.

As we consider the entire context of Paul's letter to the Galatians, we note that he writes in chapter 5:

But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law. Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you just as I have forewarned you *that those who practice such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God* (Gal. 5:18-21, emphasis added).

If Paul wanted to convey to the Galatians that they could be unholy and gain heaven, then he would have never written such words. His message was not that unholy people could go to heaven, but that those who nullify God's grace and Christ's sacrifice by trying to earn their salvation through circumcision and the Mosaic Law cannot be saved. It is not circumcision that brings salvation. It is faith in Jesus that results in a salvation that changes believers into holy new creations:

For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation (Gal. 6:15).

All of this, again, shows how vital it is to consider context when interpreting Scripture. The only way that the gospel can be distorted by means of the Word of God is by ignoring context. We can only wonder about the hearts of "ministers" who do this in such a blatant way that it cannot be anything but deliberate.

For example, I once heard a preacher declare that we should never mention God's wrath when we preach the gospel, because the Bible says that, "it is the kindness of God that leads you to repentance" (Rom. 2:4). Thus, according to him, the proper way to proclaim the gospel was to speak only of God's love and goodness. That would supposedly lead people to repent.

But when we read the context of the solitary verse that preacher quoted from the second chapter of Romans, we discover that it is encased by scriptures about God's judgment and holy wrath! The immediate context reveals that there isn't any possibility that Paul's intended meaning was what that preacher said it was:

And we know that the *judgment of God* rightly falls upon those who practice such things. And do you suppose this, O man, when you pass judgment upon those who practice such things and do the same yourself, that you will escape *the judgment of God*? Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing *that the kindness of God leads you to repentance*? But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who will render to every man according to his deeds: to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life; but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, *wrath and indignation. There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil*, of the Jew first and also of the Greek (Rom. 2:2-9, emphasis added).

Paul's reference to God's kindness is about the kindness God shows in delaying His wrath! And one wonders how a minister could make such an absurd statement in light the greater context of the Bible, which is full of examples of preachers who publicly warned sinners to repent.

Scripture's Consistency

Because the Bible is inspired by one Person, its message is consistent throughout. That is why we can trust context to help us interpret God's intended meaning in any given passage. God would not say something in one verse that contradicts another verse, and if it appears that He has, we need to keep studying until our interpretation of both verses harmonizes. For example, in several places in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, it may at first appear as if He was contradicting, even correcting, an Old Testament moral law. For example:

You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth." But I say to you, do not resist him who is evil; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn

to him the other also (Matt. 5:38-39).

Jesus quoted directly from the Mosaic Law and then made a statement that seemed to contradict the very law He quoted. How are we to interpret what He said? Has God changed His mind on an issue of basic morality? Was taking revenge acceptable behavior under the old covenant but not the new? The context is what will help us.

Jesus was speaking primarily to His disciples (see Matt. 5:1-2), people whose only previous exposure to God's Word was via the scribes and Pharisees who taught in their synagogues. There they had heard God's law quoted, "An eye for eye, and a tooth for a tooth," a commandment whose meaning the scribes and Pharisees had twisted by ignoring its context. God did not intend for that commandment to be interpreted as a requirement for His people to always gain personal revenge for petty wrongs. He, in fact, said in the Mosaic Law that vengeance was His (see Deut. 32:35), and that His people should do good to their enemies (see Ex. 23:4-5). But the scribes and Pharisees ignored those commandments and invented their own interpretation of God's "eye for an eye" law, one that gave them the convenient right of personal revenge.³ They ignored context.

God's commandment about "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth" is found within the context of His commandments that prescribe due justice in Israel's courts (see Ex. 21:22-24; Deut. 19:15-21). Making provision for a court system is in itself a revelation of God's disapproval of personal revenge. Impartial judges who examine evidence are much more able to administer justice than are offended, biased individuals. God expects that courts and judges will impartially dole out punishments that fit the crimes. Thus, "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth."

All this being so, we are able to harmonize what at first appears contradictory. Jesus was simply helping His audience, people who had sat under false teaching all their lives, understand God's true will for them regarding personal revenge, what had already been revealed in the Law of Moses but had been twisted by the Pharisees. Jesus was not contradicting the Law He gave to Moses. He was only revealing its originally-intended meaning.

This also helps us rightly understand what Jesus expects of us in regard to major disputes, the kind of which might lead to a court case. God did not expect the Israelites to overlook any and every offense suffered from fellow Israelites, otherwise He would not have established a court system. Likewise, God does not expect Christians to overlook any and every offense suffered by means of fellow believers (or non-believers). The New Testament prescribes that irreconcilable Christians use the mediatory help of fellow believers (see 1 Cor. 6:1-6). And there is nothing wrong with a Christian taking a non-believer to secular courts regarding disputes of major offense. Major offenses are such things as having your eye or tooth knocked out! Minor offenses are the kinds of things Jesus spoke of, like being slapped on the cheek, or being sued for a small settlement (like your shirt), or being forced to go one mile. God wants His people to imitate Him and show extraordinary grace to thoughtless sinners and evil people.

Along these same lines, there have been some well-meaning believers who, thinking they were obeying Jesus, refused to press legal charges against those who had been caught stealing from them. They thought they were "turning the other cheek," when in reality they were enabling a thief to steal again, teaching him that there are no consequences for crime. Such Christians are not walking in love towards everyone else who will have goods stolen by that same thief! God wants thieves to suffer justice and repent. But when someone offends you in some minor way, such as slapping your cheek, don't take him to court or slap him back. Show him mercy and love.

³ It should also be noted that Jesus had said earlier in His sermon that unless His audience's righteousness surpassed that of the scribes and Pharisees, they would not enter heaven (see Matt. 5:20). Jesus then continued by revealing a number of specific ways in which the scribes and Pharisees were falling short.

Interpreting the Old in Light of the New

Not only should we interpret New Testament scriptures in the light of the Old Testament, we should always interpret Old Testament scriptures in light of the New Testament. For example, some sincere believers have read the dietary laws of Moses and concluded that Christians should restrict their diets in accordance with those laws. If they would read just two passages in the New Testament, however, they would discover that Moses' dietary laws are not applicable to those under the New Covenant:

And He [Jesus] said to them, "Are you too so uncomprehending? Do you not see that whatever goes into the man from outside cannot defile him; because it does not go into his heart, but into his stomach, and is eliminated?" (Thus He declared all foods clean) (Mark 7:18-19).

But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron, men who forbid marriage and advocate abstaining from foods, which God has created to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, if it is received with gratitude; for it is sanctified by means of the word of God and prayer (1 Tim. 4:1-5).

Under the new covenant, we are not subject to the Law of Moses, but to the Law of Christ (see 1 Cor. 9:20-21). Although Jesus certainly endorsed the moral aspects of Mosaic Law (thus incorporating them into the Law of Christ), neither He nor the apostles taught that Christians are obligated to keep the Mosaic dietary laws.

It is clear, however, that the early Christians, all converted Jews, continued to keep the old covenant dietary laws because of their cultural convictions (see Acts 10:9-14). And as Gentiles began to believe in Jesus, the early Jewish Christians asked them to follow Mosaic dietary laws limitedly purely out of deference to neighboring Jews who might be otherwise offended (see Acts 15:1-21). Thus, there is nothing wrong with Christians keeping the dietary laws of Moses just as long as they aren't trusting that keeping those laws is what saves them.

Some of the early Christians were also persuaded that it was wrong to eat meats that had been sacrificed to idols. Paul instructed believers who thought otherwise (like himself) to walk in love towards their brethren of "weaker faith" (see Rom. 14:1), doing nothing to cause them to violate their consciences. If a person abstains from eating foods out of conviction before God (even if those convictions are unfounded), he is to be commended for his devotion, not condemned for his misunderstanding. Likewise, those who abstain from certain foods out of personal conviction should not pass judgment on those who don't abstain. Both groups should walk in love towards the other, as this is certainly commanded by God (see Rom. 14:1-23).

In any case, because the Bible is progressive revelation, we should always interpret the oldest revelation (the Old Testament) through the light of the newest revelation (the New Testament). None of the revelation that God has ever given is contradictory; it is always complimentary.

Cultural and Historical Context

Whenever possible, we should also consider the cultural and historical context of the scripture passages we are studying. Knowing something about the unique aspects of the culture, geography and history of a biblical setting often helps us to gain insight we might otherwise have missed. Of course, this requires some help from books besides the Bible. A good study Bible will usually contain help in this area.

Here are a few examples of how historical or cultural information can keep us from confusion when reading the Bible:

1.) We sometimes read in Scripture of people going up on housetops (see Acts 10:9) or digging through roofs (see Mark 2:4). It helps to know that roofs were generally flat in Israel in Bible days, and that there were stairways on the outside of most homes that led up to those flat roofs. If we don't know that, we might imagine some biblical character on a rooftop straddling the roof peak and clinging to the chimney!

2.) We read in Mark 11:12-14 that Jesus cursed a fig tree because it had no figs, even though "it was not the season for figs." It helps to know that fig trees usually have a few figs on them even when they are out of season, so Jesus was not unreasonable in His expectation.

3.) We read in Luke 7:37-48 about a woman who entered a Pharisee's house where Jesus was dining. Scripture says that as she stood behind Jesus weeping, she began to wet His feet with her tears, wipe them with her hair, and kiss and anoint them with perfume. We wonder how such a thing could be accomplished as Jesus was sitting around a table eating. Did she crawl under the table? How was she able to get through the legs of all the other diners?

The answer is found in Luke's statement that Jesus was "reclining at the table" (Luke 7:37). The customary way of eating in those days was to lie on one's side on the floor around a low table, propping oneself up with one arm and feeding one's mouth with the other arm and hand. In this posture was Jesus adored by the woman.

This also helps us understand how John could lean against Jesus' breast at the Last Supper to ask Him a question. John was lying on his side with his back facing Jesus, and he simply leaned back on Jesus' breast to ask his question discretely (see John 13:23-25). DaVinci's famous painting of the Last Supper, which shows Jesus seated at a table with six of His disciples on either side, reveals the painter's biblical ignorance. He needed some historical context!

A Common Question About Clothes

One question that I'm often asked by pastors around the world is this: "Is it acceptable for Christian women to wear trousers, considering that the Bible forbids women from wearing men's clothing?"

This is good question that we can answer by applying some sound rules of interpretation and through a little cultural context.

First, let's examine the Bible's prohibition against women wearing men's clothing (and visa-versa):

A woman shall not wear man's clothing, nor shall a man put on a woman's clothing; for whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord your God (Deut. 22:5).

We should begin by asking, "What was God's intention in giving this commandment?" Was His goal to keep women from wearing trousers?

No, that couldn't have been His intention, because no men in Israel wore trousers when God originally said this. Trousers were not considered to be men's clothing or anyone's clothing for that matter. In fact, what men wore in biblical days would seem more like women's clothing to most of us today! That is a little bit of historical and cultural information that helps us to interpret correctly what God is trying to say.

So what *was* God's intention?

We read that whoever wore clothing of the opposite sex was an *abomination* to the Lord. That sounds quite serious. If a man takes a woman's scarf and places it on his head for three seconds, does that make him an abomination to God? That seems very doubtful.

It would seem more likely that what God was opposed to was people intentionally dressing so that they would appear to be the opposite sex. Why would anyone want to do

such a thing? Only because he or she was hoping to seduce someone of the same sex, a sexual perversion referred to as *transvestitism*. I think we can understand how *that* would be considered an abomination to God.

Thus one cannot rightfully conclude that it is wrong for women to wear trousers based on Deuteronomy 22:5, unless she is doing so as a transvestite. As long as she still looks like a woman, she is not sinning by wearing trousers.

Of course, Scripture teaches that women should dress modestly (see 1 Tim. 2:9), and so trousers that are skintight and revealing are inappropriate (as are skintight dresses and skirts) because they could lead men to lust. Much of the clothing that women wear publicly in Western countries is completely inappropriate and is the kind of clothing that only prostitutes wear in developing countries. No Christian woman should wear publicly clothing with the goal of appearing “sexy.”

A Few Other Thoughts

It is interesting that I’ve never been asked the question regarding women wearing trousers by pastors in China. That is probably because most Chinese women have been wearing trousers for a long time. I’ve only been asked the question regarding women and trousers by pastors in countries where most women don’t wear trousers. This shows their personal cultural bias.

It is also interesting to me that I’ve never been asked a similar question by female ministers in Myanmar, where men traditionally wear what we might call a skirt, but what they call a *longgi*. Again, what constitutes women’s and men’s clothing varies from culture to culture, so we must be careful not to force our cultural understanding on the Bible.

Finally, I wonder why so many men who expect women not to wear trousers based on Deuteronomy 22:5 feel no obligation to apply Leviticus 19:27 to themselves, which says,

You shall not round off the side-growth of your heads, nor harm the edges of your beard (Lev. 19:27).

How can men, in defiance of Leviticus 19:27, completely shave their own God-given beards, beards that clearly distinguish them from women, and then accuse women who wear trousers of trying to look like men? That would seem to be a little bit hypocritical!

Incidentally, a little historical information helps us understand God’s intention in Leviticus 19:27. Rounding off the side-growth of beards was part of an idolatrous pagan ritual. God didn’t want His people to appear to be devoted to pagan idols.

Who is Speaking?

We should always note who is doing the speaking in any given biblical passage, as that bit of contextual information will help us rightly interpret it. Although everything in the Bible is inspired to be in the Bible, not everything in the Bible is the inspired Word of God. What do I mean?

In many passages of Scripture, the uninspired words of people are recorded. Therefore, we shouldn’t think that everything spoken by people in the Bible is inspired by God.

For example, some make the error of quoting the words of Job and his friends as if they were the inspired words of God. There are two reasons why this is a mistake. First, Job and his friends *argued* for thirty-four chapters. They disagreed. Obviously not everything they said could be God’s inspired Word because God doesn’t contradict Himself.

Second, at the close of the book of Job, God Himself speaks, and He rebukes both Job and his friends for saying things that were not correct (see Job 38-42).

We must take the same precautions when reading the New Testament. In several cases, Paul plainly stated that certain portions of his writings were only his own opinions (see 1 Cor. 7:12, 25-26, 40).

Who is Being Addressed?

Not only should we ask who is doing the speaking in any given biblical passage, we should also take note of who is being addressed. If we don't, we might misinterpret something as applicable to us that isn't. Or we might interpret something that is applicable to us as not being applicable.

For example, some claim a promise found in Psalm 37:4, believing it applies to them:

He will give you the desires of your heart (Psalm 37:4).

But does that promise apply to everyone who reads or knows it? No, if we read the context, we find that it only applies to certain people who meet five conditions:

Trust in the Lord, and do good; dwell in the land and cultivate faithfulness. Delight yourself in the Lord; and He will give you the desires of your heart (Psalm 37:3-4).

So we see how important it is that we take note of who is being addressed. Here is another example:

Peter began to say to Him [Jesus], "Behold, we have left everything and followed You." Jesus said, "Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or farms, for My sake and for the gospel's sake, but that he shall receive a hundred times as much now in the present age, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and farms, along with persecutions; and in the age to come, eternal life" (Mark 10:28-30).

It is quite popular in some circles to claim the "hundred-fold return" when one gives money to support someone who is preaching the gospel. But does this promise apply to such people? No, it is addressed to people who actually leave their families, farms, or homes to preach the gospel, as did Peter, who asked Jesus what His and the other disciples' reward would be.

Interestingly, those who always preach about the hundred-fold return seem to focus primarily on the houses and farms, and never the children and persecutions that are also promised! Jesus, of course, was not promising that those who leave their homes will receive ownership of one-hundred homes in return. He was promising that when they leave their families and homes, the members of their new spiritual families will open up their homes for lodging. True disciples don't care about ownership because they don't own anything themselves—they are only stewards of that which is God's.

A Final Example

When people read what is known as Jesus' "Olivet Discourse," found in Matthew 24-25, some wrongly think He was speaking to unsaved people, and thus incorrectly conclude that what He said has no application to them. They read the Parable of the Unfaithful Servant and the Parable of the Ten Virgins as if they were addressed to unbelievers. But as I've already said, both were addressed to some of Jesus' closest disciples (see Matt. 24:3; Mark 13:3). Therefore, if Peter, James, John and Andrew needed to be warned of the possibility of not being ready when Jesus returned, so do we. Jesus' warnings in the Olivet Discourse are also applicable to every believer, even those who don't think so because of they fail to note who was being addressed by Jesus.

Rule #3 Read Honestly. Don't force your theology into a text. If you read something that contradicts what you believe, don't try to change the Bible; change what you believe.

Every one of us approaches the Scripture with some pre-conceived biases. For that reason, it is often very difficult for us to read the Bible honestly. We end up forcing our beliefs into Scripture, rather than letting the Bible mold our theology. We sometimes even hunt for scriptures that will support our doctrines, ignoring those that contradict our beliefs. This is known as “proof-texting.”

Here is an example I recently encountered of forcing theology into a text. A particular teacher first read Matthew 11:28-29, a well-known quotation of Jesus:

Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls (Matt. 11:28-29)

The teacher then went on to explain that Jesus was offering *two different* rests. The first rest (supposedly) is the rest of salvation in 11:28, and the second rest is the rest of discipleship in 11:29. The first rest is received by coming to Jesus; the second rest is received by submitting to Him as Lord, or taking His yoke.

But was that the meaning Jesus intended? No, that is forcing a meaning into the text that is neither stated nor implied. Jesus didn't say He was offering two rests. He was offering one rest to those who are weary and heavy-laden, and the only way to receive that singular rest is by taking Jesus' yoke, that is, submitting to Him. That is Jesus' obvious meaning.

Why did that teacher come up with such an interpretation? Because the obvious meaning of the passage didn't fit his belief that there are two kinds of heaven-bound Christians—believers and disciples. So he did not interpret this passage honestly.

Of course, as we have seen from scores of other scriptures earlier in this book as we considered that particular theology, that teacher's interpretation doesn't fit the context of the rest of what Jesus taught. Nowhere does the New Testament teach that there are two kinds of heaven-bound Christians, the believers and the disciples. All true believers are disciples. Those who are not disciples are not believers. Discipleship is the fruit of genuine faith.

Let us strive to read the Bible honestly, with pure hearts. If we do, the result will be more devotion and obedience to Christ.