

Sermon Outline

“Biblical Interpretation: Content and Application” – Reading the Bible For All Its Worth, Part 4 – Don DeVries – January 29, 2012

Introduction

1. “Let’s face it – English is a crazy language. There is no “egg” in eggplant nor “ham” in hamburger ... English muffins weren’t invented in England or French fries in France. Sweetmeats are candies while sweetbreads are meat. If we explore its paradoxes, we find that quicksand can work slowly. And why is it that writers “write” but fingers don’t “fing,” grocers don’t “groce” and hammers don’t “ham”? If teachers taught, why don’t preachers “praught”? If vegetarians eat vegetables, what does a humanitarian eat?”

Sometimes I think all the English speakers should be committed to an asylum for the verbally insane. In what language do people recite at a play and play at a recital ... park on driveways and drive on parkways? How can a slim chance and a fat chance be the same, while a wise man and a wise guy are opposites?

You have to marvel at the unique lunacy of a language in which your house can burn up as it burns down, in which you fill in a form by filling it out and in which an alarm clock goes off by going on ... And why, when I wind up my watch, I start it, but when I wind up this essay, I end it.”

2. English is a creative, rich and sometimes confusing language that requires careful reading. To be good students of the Bible, we must be careful readers of our Bibles. Meaning is found in the details.

Content

1. Content has to do with the words and the grammar of a passage. As R.C. Sproul wrote, “I believe that the Bible is uniquely inspired and infallible, and this puts it in a class by itself. But for matters of interpretation, the Bible does not take on some special properties that changes basic literary patterns of interpretation ... In the Bible, a verb is a verb and a noun is a noun, just like any other book.”
2. The key to understanding the content of a biblical text is observing as many grammatical, vocabulary and literary details as possible.
3. What questions should we ask to assist in careful observation?
 - a. *What types of sentences are used: questions (interrogatives), commands (imperatives) or statements (declaratives)?* Sentence structure gives us hints about the literary structure and how a particular author is communicating truth.

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- b. *What pronouns are used?* Pronouns refer to the people, places, items or ideas in the context of a particular passage.
- c. *What verbs are used? Are the verbs past, present or future tense? Passive or active?* Verbs are important because they communicate the action of the sentence. In Paul's letters, noting passive and active verbs is particularly important. Passive verbs often tell us what God has done for us. Active verbs tell us what we do.
- d. *What conjunctions are used? "And" (joins thoughts), "for/since/because" (gives reasons), "but" (gives a contrast), "therefore" (gives a conclusion and moves the argument forward), "that/so that/in order that" (gives purpose or result).* If the Bible were a brick house, then conjunctions would be the mortar that holds the bricks together. Conjunctions hold the phrases and sentences together. Part of careful reading is to note all of the conjunctions. If we ignore them, it's like trying to build that brick house without the mortar.
- e. *Is there any cause and effect?* At times, the biblical writer will state a cause and then the effect, which is the result or consequence of that cause. For example: In Proverbs 15:1, we read, "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger." The first cause is "a gentle answer" and the effect is it "turns away wrath." The second cause is a "harsh word" and its effect is that it "stirs up anger."
- f. *What words are repeated?* When an author uses repetition, it is a literary device that adds emphasis to the truth he is trying to convey.
- g. *Are any items compared or contrasted with each other?*
- h. *Are there statements of how an action or purpose is accomplished?* Scripture will often state a *means* to accomplish something or bring something about. For example, Psalm 119:9 reads, "How can a young man keep his ways pure? *By living* according to your word." The desired action is purity. The means that this is accomplished is "by living according to God's word."
- i. *Are there any lists?*
- j. *Are there any figures of speech – simile, metaphor, hyperbole, or personification?*
 - i. Similes: comparison of two unlike things often introduced by "like" or "as." Parables often contain similes. For example, in Matthew 13, Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven is like ... a grain of mustard seed" (v31), "leaven" (v33), "treasure hidden in a field" (v44).

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- ii. Metaphors – an object or idea used in place of another suggesting an analogy. For example, Jesus said in John 10:9, “I am the door.” Jesus isn’t a physical door on hinges. He is the way to the Father, the entrance to the Kingdom.
 - iii. Hyperbole – an exaggerated statement for effect. In Matthew 5:29-30, Jesus said, “If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out ... if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off.” A literal interpretation is bizarre. Understood as hyperbole, Jesus was saying, in context, don’t take the sin of lust lightly. Deal with it aggressively and forcefully.
 - iv. Personification - a poetic device in which inanimate objects are given human characteristics. Example: Isaiah 55:12, “For you shall go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall break forth into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.” Creation is not literally singing and clapping. This describes the great rejoicing of the Jewish people returning from Babylonian captivity.
- k. *What is the general flow and structure of this passage?*
4. Book Recommendation: *Dig Deeper: Tools for Understanding God’s Word*, by Nigel Beynon and Andrew Sachs.

Bible Translations

1. When considering an English Bible, we should begin by asking, “What is the translation philosophy of a particular English version?”
2. There are two translation philosophies for English Bibles: “Formal Equivalence” and “Dynamic Equivalence.” Both approaches work with the original languages in the Old and New Testaments and both approaches want to be faithful to what the Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic are communicating. The difference between the two approaches concerns how best to communicate what the original authors of the Bible wrote.
3. *Formal Equivalence*: This translation philosophy focuses on the original text.
 - a. Word-for-word – the translator’s goal is to stay as close as possible to a “word-for-word” correspondence with the Hebrew and Greek and to preserve, as much as possible, grammatical structures – sentence forms, matching nouns with nouns, verbs with verbs, and so forth.
 - i. NOTE: No translation is truly literal because languages don’t transfer word-for-word or structure for structure. Therefore, all translations involve some degree of interpretation.

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- b. Advantage: Corresponds to the form of the original languages
 - c. Disadvantage: Stilted, “wooden” English style - less readable and perhaps less meaningful and impacting.
 - d. Formal Equivalence Translations: *English Standard Version (ESV)*, *Holman Christian Standard Bible (HSCB)*, *King James Version (KJV)*, *New King James Version (NKJV)*, *New American Standard Bible (NASB)*, *Revised Standard Version (RSV)*.
4. *Dynamic Equivalence*: This translation philosophy focuses on the target audience.
- a. Thought-for-thought – A dynamic equivalent translation is a “thought- for-thought” translation that seeks to accurately convey the same meaning as the original languages in English but is not as concerned about preserving the same number of words or the equivalent grammatical construction. Clarity of English expression is important. This kind of translation seeks to capture the meaning of the text in clear and natural language – the way the reader normally would speak.
 - b. Advantage: More readable and easier to understand.
 - c. Disadvantage: More of the translator’s interpretations come through the translation.
 - d. Dynamic Equivalence Translations: *New International Version (NIV)*, *New Living Translation (NLT)*, *The Message (TM)*
5. Although there are two primary philosophies, each translation falls on a continuum of being more “Formally Equivalent” or more “Dynamically Equivalent.” Following are examples of different translations that illustrate the continuum:
- a. John 1:18 – (Literal translation) “God no man has seen ever; only begotten God the being in the bosom of the Father that one explained”
 - b. John 1:18 - English Standard Version (ESV) – (formal equivalence) “No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known.”
 - c. John 1:18 - New International Version (NIV) – (in-between formal and dynamic equivalence) “No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.”
 - d. John 1:18 - New Living Translation (NLT) – (dynamic equivalence) “No one has ever seen God. But the unique One, who is himself God, is near to the Father’s heart. He has revealed God to us.”

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- e. John 1:18 – The Message (TM) – (dynamic equivalence, nearly a paraphrase) “No one has ever seen God, not so much as a glimpse. This one-of-a-kind God-Expression, who exists at the very heart of the Father, has made him plain as day.”
- 6. There are other questions to ask when considering which English translations to use. Does it retain important theological terms? Does it retain doctrinal reliability? How does it handle gender language? And how will this translation be used?
 - a. Here are some suggestions how some of these various translations can be used.
 - i. For serious reading and study: consider a more “word-for-word” translation or one in between: *ESV, NASB or NIV*
 - ii. For new believers or those who have difficulty with English: *New Living Translation* is very readable and accessible.
 - iii. For the un-churched – *The New Living Translation* or *The Message* are very good choices

Application

1. The journey back into the time and history of the Biblical writer is an exciting journey. However, it is not an end in itself. We can deceive ourselves that we are growing in godliness just because we know more. But the goal of all the study is the transformation of our thinking, our heart, our attitudes and our actions – all for the glory of God. Interpretation without application can lead to self-deception.
2. What is application? Application is “the thoughtful appropriation of biblical truth to our lives – how we take it in, embrace it, and adjust our lives to bring them in line with the truth of God’s Word.” – Dr. George Guthrie
3. Applying God’s Word is difficult to do consistently and to do well. Why? Because we don’t want to adjust our lives or align it with God’s Word. Our hearts can be rebellious or lazy to act on what we know to be true. And we tend to be vague, mushy and general in our treatment of Scripture rather than clear and specific. So how can we grow to apply God’s Word to our lives?
4. Ask specific questions; Make specific plans.
 - a. *What issues does this passage raise that are relevant to my life?* Look for the principles and truths that apply to the situations of your daily life.

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- b. *What kind of response does this passage call from me?*
 - i. *Are there examples to follow?* Example: How can I serve my wife this week like Jesus served the disciples?
 - ii. *Are there commandments to obey?* What would obedience to this command specifically look like?
 - iii. *Are there sins to forsake?* What must I repent of, put off and put on?
 - iv. *Are there promises to claim?* How can I commit these to memory so I can be encouraged and strengthened?
 - v. *Are there principles to live by?* What truths are still relevant today to me?
- c. *Are there new thoughts about God? What must I believe about God? How can I respond in worship?*
- d. *How does God invite me to love and experience Jesus by this passage?*

5. Pray Scripture

- a. The Psalms, the prayers of Paul and other places in the New Testament are good starting places to look for Scripture to turn into prayer. When you pray Scripture, you spend time meditating and reflecting in a deeper way on a particular set of verses. And frequently the Holy Spirit uses His Word as we pray to bring specific application to life's circumstances that can be offered up in prayer.

Conclusion

"When Vietnam fell to the communists, a Christian man named Hin continued to preach the gospel...despite being arrested many times. During one particular incarceration, his captors made a concerted effort to indoctrinate him...They wouldn't let him read anything in English, only French or Vietnamese, and only works of a Communist nature.

After being indoctrinated for so long, Hin began...to wonder if his years of faithful service to the Lord had been in vain and if Communism was in fact the answer to man's greatest problems. Finally, he came to the point where he decided that starting the next day, he wouldn't pray anymore.

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On a day when Hin had finally given up and chosen to let go of his faith, he was ordered to clean the latrines in the prison camp. There, as he toiled in the midst of filth and stench, he saw a piece of paper on the ground. Although it was [badly soiled as it had been used as toilet paper]... Hin was able to discern that it had English words printed on it. His heart leapt. He hadn't seen English in so long! He quickly washed it off and stuck it in his pocket, waiting for a chance to be alone and see what he had found. That night, under his mosquito net, he shined his flashlight on the damp piece of paper and read the following words:

'And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.' (Romans 8:28)

Hin asked for forgiveness and recommitted himself to the Lord that night.

This one page of the Bible was so precious to Hin that he went the next day and asked to clean the latrines. For weeks thereafter, Hin willingly braved his foul daily chore in the hope of finding more of the Scriptures. Every page Hin found was soiled [but] he cleaned and treasured them all. Eventually, he assembled the entire book of Romans and other parts of the Bible.

Ultimately Hin was released from prison and continues in his service to the Lord."