
a *Grace Notes* course

Foundations I

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Foundations 104

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Grace Notes

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Lesson 9 – Interpret to Find Out How to Live

This principle comes from a direct statement of Jesus Christ found in John 7:17. If we truly want to “know” God’s Word, then we must be willing to “do” His Word. This principle encompasses the necessity of intellectual honesty in the study of God’s Word. We must seek to set aside our bias and our preconceived ideas and honestly seek illumination from the Spirit of God (1 Cor 2:14). Applying this principle involves personal soul searching, for example, to evaluate the purity of our motives (2 Cor 13:5).

It is easy for us to hold personal bias, or form unwarranted opinions, and then go searching for a Biblical proof of them. However, that approach can “prove” almost anything, because it makes us blind to passages that could lead in other directions, or to passages that urge us to seek balance.

For example, one might look at King David’s actions concerning Bathsheba, the wife of one of his most loyal warriors (2 Sam 11). Some people might try to use that passage to prove that it is acceptable for a person in power to commit murder and adultery. One simply needs to read the next chapter and compare it with the “Ten Commandments” (Ex 20:1-17) to determine that murder and adultery are not an acceptable lifestyle to our God. David was retained as king because of God’s grace displayed toward David’s repentance (Ps 51).

Proper application of God’s Word has to come from proper interpretation. There may be many applications, but there is only one correct interpretation of any particular verse. For example, 1 Timothy 3:1-7 gives the qualifications for an “overseer” in the church. The interpretation concerns real requirements for one who is to hold that position. The application considers that the “overseer” should not be a “new convert,” and that the listed qualifications represent qualities of maturity, which should be the objective for all men in the church, especially its leaders.

SIX HINDRANCES TO PROPER INTERPRETATION:

There can be many hindrances to the proper interpretation of God’s Word. We will examine six of them that lead to mistakes in interpretation. Remember that no one is immune from mistakes. It is wise, in addition, to remember the admonition from Paul found in 1 Corinthians 10:12, “Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.”

1 CARNALITY.

The first hindrance to proper interpretation is Carnality. Carnality involves an ongoing sinful lifestyle and is often referred to as “fleshly” (1 Cor 3:3). It means that the Believer has chosen to pursue sin through “deeds of the flesh” rather than be led by the Holy Spirit and see His fruit (Gal 5:19-23). This is life with unconfessed sin (1 John 1:9) and lack of repentance (2 Cor 12:21).

If one who studies God’s Word is involved in deeds of the flesh - immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing and things like these (Gal 5:19-21) - then his interpretation will surely be flawed. For instance, a teacher who is involved in sexual immorality would clearly have the tendency to distort passages that deal with that subject.

Since truth is revealed by the Holy Spirit (John 16:13) and the “fleshly” man has chosen to pursue a path of life apart from the leading of the Holy Spirit (if even for a short period of time), the “fleshly” man will get a distorted understanding of truth since he is not “spiritually appraising” the Word.

The “fleshly” man is similar to the “natural man” (1 Cor 2:14), but slightly different. The “natural man” refers to an unbeliever who, “does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised” (1 Cor 2:14). The “natural man” does not have access to the Spirit while the “fleshly/carnal” man is not in fellowship with the Spirit. Neither will be able to correctly understand God’s Word.

2 VANITY.

Vanity is the quest for fame or recognition, found in the one who desires the applause of men. Vanity can also directly lead to improper interpretation. We are warned in Proverbs 16:18: “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before stumbling.” This is good advice for the interpreter.

While it is true that we should diligently study God’s Word, it is also true that we must “handle it accurately” (2 Tim 2:15). Our study must be guided by our love for the Lord and others (Mark 12:29-31), not a desire to be recognized for our insightful pondering. Learning something “new,” which expands our personal understanding is necessary to spiritual growth, but if we search God’s Word for new information to impress others, we are searching in vain because our motives are not pure.

We should not be so proud of our “method” of study that we think it guarantees accurate interpretation, lest we forget the primary role of the Holy Spirit in understanding God’s Word.

3 BIAS.

The third hindrance to proper interpretation is personal bias. Bias is a prejudice based on individual preferences and it basically distorts the text with a negative attitude: “I don’t want something to be this way.” If such an attitude is strong enough, it may distort portions of God’s Word.

Sadly, some have used their own personal prejudices in an attempt to justify with God’s Word such horrific attitudes like racism - even though the Bible is clearly against it.

“For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise” (Gal 3:27-29).

If God were prejudiced, then no Gentiles (non-Jews) would be saved.

4 LACK OF CONSISTENCY.

When we try to interpret God’s Word, but are not consistent in several “SPIRITUAL” practices, we can succumb to incorrect interpretations.

A The Practice of Consistent Self-Evaluation and Confession:

We are told in 2 Corinthians 13:5 to, “Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves!” We are to place not only our actions but our motives before the Lord for comparison with His standards. When we find that we have failed, we must place the failure before the Lord and be cleansed. 1 John 1:9 reads, “If we confess our sins, He [God] is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

Failure to carry out this practice leads to carnality, which produces distortion and error in the interpretation of God’s Word.

B The Practice of Consistent Prayer:

We are told in Matthew 7:7-8, “Ask, and it shall be given to you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it shall be opened.” We should consistently pray for understanding and retention of God’s Word.

Failure to carry out this practice leads to a break in fellowship with God the Father, whose Word you are trying to interpret.

C The Practice of Consistent Study

We are told in 2 Timothy 2:15 that an important part of handling accurately the Word of God is diligence: “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth.”

A lack of consistency in Bible study will lead to failures in keeping track of the context within which the specific verse is located.

5. FAULTY METHODOLOGY.

Our method of interpretation can also hinder accuracy. Our basic beliefs about the text will certainly affect the way we understand it. For instance if we don’t believe that all of the Bible is inspired by God (2 Tim 3:16-17), then we might try to rationalize miraculous events with scientific

reasoning. If we do believe that the entire Bible is literally true, then miracles must be interpreted as divine interventions in history.

There are some who believe that only certain Christians have been given the gift of interpreting God's Word. However, the Bible says that all Believers are priests (1 Pet 2:5,9). As priests we have access into the throne room of God (Heb 4:16), where we can be taught directly by God the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 2:15).

Others distort the Bible with allegorical or mythological interpretations of passages that ought to be taken literally. Allegory refers to the insertion of foreign meaning into the text. If we claim the Flood of Noah was not literally a global worldwide catastrophe (flood), but instead a picture of the sufferings that mankind must endure, then we would be guilty of interpreting allegorically.

Mythology refers to narratives with a small amount of truth and a large amount of exaggeration. If we view the Flood of Noah as only a small, localized flood that was later exaggerated by the local inhabitants into a global disaster, we would be interpreting mythologically. One could say that in mythology there is a small amount of truth surrounded by a lot of lies.

Some even go so far as to apply allegorical and mythological interpretations to Jesus Christ, the Cross, and the Resurrection. If such interpretations were true, then Jesus did not really die for our sins, nor was he buried, nor resurrected for our redemption. According to the apostle Paul, we are in serious trouble if these events did not literally happen (1 Cor 15).

A purely literal method that does not consider figures of speech can also hinder interpretation. For example, the book entitled Song of Solomon is an extraordinary literary work, which interpreted literally makes absolutely no sense at all. Accordingly, the correct method involves a literal interpretation that recognizes figures of speech and typological language. We will discuss this more fully in Lesson 9, Section II.

6. FAULTY REASONING.

Human reasoning can never fully comprehend the infinite God. If we could completely understand

God through human faculties, we would certainly become arrogant. We are told in Proverbs 3:5-7 to, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight. Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord and turn away from evil." God wants us to walk by faith, and not by our own understanding.

We have been promised that one day we will fully comprehend our Lord. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 13:12, "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I shall know fully, just as I also have been fully known." All the unanswered questions about Scripture that we now have will one day be answered when we are face to face with our Lord (2 Cor 3:18).

The Jews of the first century had some problems relying on their ability to reason, which contributed to the tragic error of not recognizing Jesus as the Messiah. Consider the conversation between Jesus and the Pharisees recorded in Matthew 22:41-46:

"Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question, saying, 'What do you think about the Christ, whose son is He?' They said to Him, 'The son of David.' He said to them, 'Then how does David in the Spirit call Him "Lord," saying, The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at My right hand, until I put Thine enemies beneath Thy feet"'? 'If David then calls Him "Lord," how is He his son?' And no one was able to answer Him a word, nor did anyone dare from that day on to ask Him another question."

Jesus quoted Psalm 110:1, asking the Pharisees how the Messiah can be David's "son," and simultaneously be David's "Lord." The answer is that the Messiah is both God and man; such reasoning seems to be contradictory, doesn't it?

FIVE STEPS TO A PROPER APPLICATION:

- 1 Pray for understanding, recollection, and proper application of spiritual principle(s)
- 2 Seek to correctly and fully understand the passage being considered. This involves studying the relationships that words have to sentences, sentences have to paragraphs, paragraphs have to

chapters, and chapters have to books. This step will be examined in much greater detail later in the study.

3 Determine the spiritual principle that comes from the interpretation of a particular passage. A spiritual principle crosses all time frames and cultures. For example, sexual immorality (a physical relationship outside of marriage) is sin in all time frames and cultures. The spiritual principle is to avoid sexual immorality.

1. Honestly examine your life to see if you are in violation of any principle of scripture, and submit yourself to God for correction of the wrongdoing. Read Psalm 51 and note the elements of David's repentance concerning his sin with Bathsheba.

1 Walk in grace and faith "As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him" (Col 2:6).

EIGHT WAYS TO FAIL THE APPLICATION:

1. Failure to rely on the Lord for the strength to carry out the application.

1 Resistance to changing attitudes or actions that conflict with God's truth.

2 Disobedience to the principles known to be correct.

3 Succumbing to the pressure of conforming to worldly standards.

4 Lack of interest in the application of God's Word to your life.

5 Redefining sin in such a way that it is legalistic or non-existent.

6 Substituting emotional feelings for wise choices.

7 Distortions of thinking due to prejudice, bias, or laziness.

Lesson 10 – Interpret from Primary Passages

This principle recognizes that certain passages are to be read as the primary declaration of God's attitude on a subject, that is vital to our spiritual life. Many times in the Bible, God gathers together several scattered fragments that have to

do with a particular truth and places them in one of these primary passages. Some examples include:

- The Resurrection of Jesus Christ. 1 Cor 15
- The Human Tongue. James 3
- The Restoration of Israel. Rom 11
- Triumphs of the Faith. Heb 11
- God's Discipline of His Children. Heb 12:1-11
- The Church. Eph 1-3
- Righteousness by Faith. Rom 3:10-21
- Law. Ex 20
- Full Armor of God. Eph 6:10-17
- Love. 1 Cor 13

This principle requires us to study the primary passage of Scripture to determine major principles and then go to related passages for additional information.

For example, the most extensive discourse in the Bible on the qualities of love is found in 1 Corinthians 13:4-8a, where there are sixteen qualities so full of meaning that we could easily spend a week in classroom instruction on these verses alone. Consider that:

"Love is patient, love is kind, and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails."

When we read Mark 12:29-31, we find that Jesus responded to a question concerning the greatest commandments:

"The foremost is, 'Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

Since the Two Greatest Commandments involve the quality of love, seeking to know what love involves - so we can make correct evaluations of

ourselves before God and others - is good common sense. The importance of love is found in Mark 12. Its manifestation is found in 1 Corinthians 13.

If you would like to test your application of "love" defined in the verses of 1 Corinthians 13, ask yourself these questions: "Am I patient?" "Am I kind?" "Am I jealous?"

Another example of this principle is found in the description of the "full armor of God" Ephesians 6:10-17. This is the only place where all of the Believer's spiritual armor is mentioned together. The belt that one "girds his loins with truth" is referred to in Isaiah 11:5. The "Breastplate" and "Helmet" are referred to in 1 Thessalonians 5:8. The "Sword" as part of one's "armor" is implied in Hebrews 4:12.

Lesson 11 – Interpret Based on Context

This principle is based on the fact that every word, sentence, or verse in the Bible has information preceding it and following it (except the very first and the very last word, sentence or verse). This principle pays careful attention to the physical location of each word and verse and the relationship to other words and verses. God sheds light upon a subject either through passages that are nearby - that establish the theme for that section - or through passages that are similar in subject in another part of the Bible.

We should never take a verse out of its contextual setting and give it a foreign meaning. Using verses out of context is a deceptive way to try to prove one's own ideas and promote personal agendas. This incorrect practice is a form of allegory, which we discussed in Section II Lesson 4.

Contextual interpretation basically means that readers determine who is speaking, who is the audience, what is the main theme of the passage, and in what time frame and place the teachings are valid. (The student may need to review Section I Lesson 5, "Preparing To Study The Bible.")

THREE TYPES OF CONTEXT:

1 THE NEAR CONTEXT.

The Near Context includes verses within the same paragraph. For example, Galatians 5:1 tells us, "It

was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery." We might have a tendency to apply the term "slavery" to a particular culture in a particular place and time, since "slavery" frequently refers to being physically under the domination of a person or political entity. In context, however, we see that this verse refers to a kind of slavery that is spiritual. The passage refers to those who are enslaved by the rituals of The Law - specifically circumcision - and are not "free" to "serve one another in love" (Gal 5:13).

2 THE INTERMEDIATE CONTEXT.

The Intermediate Context includes those verses found within the same book. An example of this is found in Matthew 24:40, which says, "Then there shall be two men in the field; one will be taken, and one will be left." The context concerns the subject of the "last days." The question involves who will be taken and who will be left behind? Will the righteous be taken and the wicked left, as at the Rapture of the Church; or will the wicked be taken and the righteous be left, as at the Second Advent when Christ establishes His literal Millennial Kingdom? The Near Context does not answer the question.

Matthew 13:49, however, gives the answer. In a passage also dealing with the "last days," we are told that the "wicked will be taken out from among the righteous." Thus the Intermediate Context has answered the question of who will be taken and who will be left behind. The passage is referring to the Second Advent.

This Intermediate Context informs us of the importance of studying verse by verse through a book in order to understand and maintain the context. If a student went first to Matthew 24, the answer to the above question would be difficult to find. But, if the student had read the entire book up to Matthew 24, the answer would have already been given.

3 THE REMOTE CONTEXT.

The Remote Context recognizes the internal consistency of the Word of God. It includes passages from the whole of the Bible that have a bearing on a particular passage under consideration.

A study of the Remote Context considers that a passage might be clarified by another distant portion of the Bible. Studies of a selected word, such as “grace,” “faith,” or “love,” by means of a concordance, for example, lead to other, more remote passages containing that particular word. A concordance is a book that lists - by individual word -verses in which a given word may be found. An “exhaustive” concordance will give a list of every verse containing that word. See Lesson 5, Section III for more information about concordances.

Often times the Remote Context must be consulted for more advanced principles, such as the interpretation of prophecy, or the understanding of “types” and “symbols.” For example, the Veil in the Tabernacle (Ex 26:31-35), which separated the

Holy Place from the Holy of Holies, is interpreted for us in Hebrews 10:20 to have represented the flesh of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Interpreting contextually is extremely important in our quest to “handle accurately the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15). When we make “doctrinal” statements, we must be able to prove them from Scripture to demonstrate that the Bible is harmonious in terms of its Near, Immediate and Remote Contexts. If our beliefs are not in harmony with all of Scripture, then the “doctrine” resulting from our study is questionable.
