

# her·me·neu·tics

## HOW TO STUDY YOUR BIBLE

— an eight week course with pastor ben —

### **Lesson 1 – Introduction to Hermeneutics**

Perhaps you've heard the story about the man who desperately wanted to have God speak directly to him. He prayed hard that the Lord would guide his Bible reading that day, then opened his Bible to a random page, pointed at a random sentence, and began reading. The verse stated, "And Judas went out and hanged himself." Thinking that couldn't be right, he tried again. This time he came up with "Go thou and do likewise." Confused and a little terrified, he tried a third time, "What thou doest, do quickly."

Obviously, that is not how we are supposed to study God's Word. Yet many believers struggle with knowing exactly how they should study their Bible. While they may not be pointing at random verses, they feel like they are not doing a whole lot more. In this course, we will be studying how to study the Bible. Hopefully, this will do two things. Keep you from making mistakes in understanding God's Word and give you the tools so that you know how to take a passage of God's Word and study it on your own.

I don't want this class to be too difficult, but I don't exactly want it to be easy either. Studying God's Word will take a little mental sweat, and that's okay. A well-known textbook on Hermeneutics put it this way: "The big problem with Bible study today is that we think it should be easier than other things we do. We study recipes for quality meals, how-to books for all kinds of things—carpentry, plumbing, automobile maintenance and so on—and read vociferously for our hobbies. Why do we think the Bible is the only subject we should not have to study?! Let me challenge you—make the Bible your hobby. "<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, Rev. and expanded, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 25.

## The Importance of Hermeneutics

Why does it matter so much that we learn principles for careful Bible study? Wouldn't it make more sense to just open our Bibles and trust what my pastor teaches or what the Holy Spirit?

**God commands Christians to know their Bibles (Hebrews 5:11-13).**

**Careful study of God's Word can help clear up confusion.**

**A desire to obey God should lead to a commitment to study His Word (Ezra 7:10).**

## Definitions

While you don't need to know the definitions of any of these words to be able to understand God's Word on your own, if you are going to read on the topic of hermeneutics it can be helpful to know what these different words mean and what they don't mean.

**Hermeneutics – the rules for how to study the Bible.**

- Hermeneutic of suspicion versus a hermeneutic of faith
- Dispensational hermeneutic versus a covenantal hermeneutic
- Careful hermeneutic versus a careless hermeneutic

**Exegesis – pulling out the meaning of a passage.**

Comes from the Greek words *ek*, which means "out of," and *ago*, which means "to lead." Exegesis seeks to ask what the passage itself means by careful study. This is what every Christian should aim for.

**Eisegesis – putting a meaning into the passage.**

Comes from the Greek words *eis*, which means "into," and *ago*, which means "to lead." Eisegesis is the wrong attempt to read what I think into a passage. This is what every Christian should strive to avoid!

**Exposition – the explanation of a passage.**

**Homiletics – the rules for how to write and deliver sermons.**

This is not the topic of this course, but homiletics is a word that often gets mixed up with hermeneutics so its definition was included for reference.

So how do these words relate to one another? We study a passage by asking what it means (exegesis) rather than by simply deciding for ourselves what we think it means (eisegesis). We do

this by using the right way of studying the Bible (hermeneutics). When someone shares what they have learned by explaining it to others, we call that exposition.

## The Goal of Hermeneutics

*The goal of hermeneutics is to learn what the original writer meant, to recognize the timeless truth principles in that meaning, and then apply those principles to our current situation.*

### To learn what the original writer meant

“It can’t mean what it never meant!” It can be all too easy to read a phrase or two from scripture and misunderstand what they’re saying. Some today will actually argue that a piece of writing means whatever I think it means. We reject this understanding. A piece of writing means what it meant to the original author and the original readers. This is the work of **observation**.

### To recognize the timeless truth in what he said

God wrote his truth to specific people in specific locations at specific times addressing specific problems. Some of those problems we still face today but many we don’t. For example, Paul wrote extensively about food sacrificed to idols in 1 Corinthians 8-10. While this does continue to be a problem for Christians in the East, for those of us in the West it’s possible you have never in your life even had the opportunity to eat food that had been sacrificed to an idol. So what do we do with 1 Corinthians 8-10?

We study passages such like this by asking what general theological principles are behind the specific situations we find. God’s truth is applicable to all people in all times, but when we read the Bible we find that God both gives us his truth and shows us how that truth looks played out in a specific situation. Our goal is to go backwards – reading the specific application God has made in his Word, asking what this teaches us about him and the way he has set up his world to work, and then applying that broad theological truth to specifically to our situation. This is the work of **interpretation**. Observation asks the question – what did this mean? Interpretation asks the question, what does this mean?

**Example:** In Corinth Paul doesn’t respond to the problem of idol food by simply saying, “Don’t eat food sacrificed to idols” or “It’s okay to eat food sacrificed to an idol.” Instead he takes three chapters to give two very stern warnings.

- 1) You don’t have the right to do something that would harm a brother or sister in Christ spiritually. By setting the example of eating idol food, going so far as to eat it publicly in the

temple, the Corinthians were encouraging other believers to participate in what they themselves considered to be idolatry, causing them to sin against God and wrecking their spiritual lives.

- 2) An activity that the Corinthians viewed as basically harmless – eating food sacrificed to idols – is an activity that has wrecked God’s people before during the wilderness wanderings. Participating in idolatry, even if the Corinthians think it’s no big deal, ignores the very real problem of demons and spiritual warfare.

While we may not be offered idol food any time soon, the principles of loving my neighbor enough to give up my rights for their spiritual good and realizing that I am in the middle of a spiritual war are both very applicable to Christians today.

## To apply that truth to our specific situation

Studying Greek and Roman customs, investigating words in depth and deciding their exact nuance, or writing outlines of biblical books is not enough. Nor is it enough to simply study theology until we can make right statements about the nature of God, sin, salvation, mankind, or end times. Our observations and our interpretations must begin reshaping and reforming us.

**Example:** It’s helpful to break down Christ’s statement on anger in Matthew 5:21-26. We would observe that he gives a general principle that God will judge all selfish anger in 5:21-22, and then uses two illustrations of the importance of making anger right immediately, one in verses 23-24 and one in verses 25-26. We could interpret this passage carefully by observing the fact that the anger here is “without cause,” meaning this is sinful anger because it’s selfish anger. This anger is focused on us and our own loss or inconvenience, not on the glory of God.

But obviously, we’re not done yet. We may know everything there is to know about a passage, but until it’s shown up in our lives it hasn’t done much good. Until we’ve gone and made our anger right, until we’ve asked God to root out the sinful anger in our lives and prayerfully sought to change, the truth has done us no good. After all, ***knowledge about God without love for God is a deadly thing.***

This does not mean that we come to God’s Word simply as a rulebook. God’s Word changes us, but at a much deeper level than just our behavior. God changes our ***thinking*** – helping us to think like him and see the world from his perspective. God changes our ***desires*** – helping us to truly want what is holy and to passionately hate what is evil. God changes our ***character*** – as our thinking and desires change who we are changes. As a result of all of this, God changes our ***behavior*** – so that we look and act and sound more like Jesus.

## A Little Bit of Help

Although this class is designed to help you study the Bible on your own, you must realize that you will never truly be alone! There are three important helps every good student of God's Word should be aware of.

### The role of the Holy Spirit

The most obvious help when we interpret God's Word is the Holy Spirit, but we must not take him for granted. The Holy Spirit illuminates us as we study God's Word, and he does this in two primary ways.

- **He enables us to understand the Bible accurately, but doesn't guarantee it.**  
Scripture talks often about the Spirit opening our eyes. The indwelling presence of God can certainly be a help to guide our fallen minds to a right understanding of his Word. Even with this help, however, godly people can still disagree with one another even after praying for the Spirit's help, and unbelievers can learn true things about the Bible without the Holy Spirit. For these reasons, it is best to think of the Holy Spirit enabling our understanding, but not necessarily guaranteeing it.<sup>2</sup>
- **He convinces us of the truth of Scripture and my responsibility to it.**  
If you've ever listened to a sermon and moved to tears with what it means for you while the person sitting next to you was thinking about what to eat for lunch, that was illumination. The Holy Spirit impressed upon your heart the truth of this passage for you and your need to change as a result of what you heard. This is the primary meaning of illumination.

### The role of the teacher

You need to be in a good church, regularly hearing the preaching and teaching of God's Word! Should Christians really need teachers, though? If they have the Holy Spirit in them, isn't that enough? Well, Paul didn't think so. Paul said that Christ gave gifts to his church, and then he lists them out in Ephesians 4:11 – apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. If you don't need teachers, why did Christ gift the body with them?

There will be times where what you read stumps you, ask your pastor. There will be times where what you were taught growing up seems to conflict with God's Word, ask your pastor why you believe what you believe and how they understand this particular passage. There will be times when unbelievers will ask hard questions you don't have the answer to, ask your pastor. A good teacher will tell you what God's Word says and will model for you how you

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 435-437.

should go about studying on your own. A good teacher will be able to answer questions you have about your own personal Bible study. A good teacher is an invaluable tool.

## **The role of resources**

We live in a unique time. What you have available with a simple Google search on your phone would far blow away anything that Luther or Calvin had available during their time. Most of God's people throughout history have been unable to read, let alone own a Bible, let alone have resources to help them study their Bibles, let alone have hundreds if not thousands of free resources online. To ignore the help of others when it is so easily available fails to be grateful for this incredible gift God has given to the modern church. But there are a couple of warnings.

- 1) Don't turn to your resources before studying God's Word on your own. Read the passage, pray, and ask the Holy Spirit to open your eyes. Maybe use resources to give you the background, but don't let them do all the hard work for you! Once you've studied the passage, use resources to check your work or explain something you found confusing. Letting your resources do the work for you will mean missing out on the excitement of discovery and the important exercise of trying hard to think God's thoughts after him.
- 2) Second, having lots of free resources is good, so long as they are quality and trustworthy resources. We will talk later about using good resources, but it's important to realize a simple Google search will not always bring about helpful or accurate tools. One of our goals in this class will be to help you evaluate which resources to use and to give you some guidance in where to turn if you have questions.