

How to Prepare Sermons
Lesson IV.

CHAPTER IV

THE TEXT—ITS INTERPRETATION

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I. RULES FOR THE INTERPRETATION OF A TEXT.*

There must be due recognition of the rules that determine the meaning of the text which is to form the basis of a sermon. The rules are as follows:

1. Ascertain Whether the Language of the Text is Literal or Figurative.

Usually the Bible interprets its own terms, and, by means of the context, as a rule informs the reader whether the language used is to be taken in a literal sense or not. This cannot be accomplished by intellectual science alone. Judgment and good faith, critical tact and impartiality are also necessary. It is necessary to examine the passage in all its details, critically, exegetically, and faithfully. The figurative sense must be sustained by all these processes before it can be relied upon as the true interpretation.

Our Saviour spoke in figurative language when He said to the Jews: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." How do we know this language is figurative? In this instance the narrator says so (cf. John 2:19, 21, 22).

So with Matthew 26:26, 27; Mark 14:22-24; Luke 22:19, 20; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26, in which reference is

*See *The Book of Books*, by same author.

made to the elements used in the celebration of the Eucharist. It is not literally Jesus' flesh and blood which are spoken of in these passages, but of His flesh and blood represented under the figure of bread and wine.

The words "washing" and "wash" are often used figuratively as well as literally in the Bible. When Naaman was told to "wash in Jordan seven times," it is impossible not to see that the word is to be taken in its literal sense; but when, as in 1 Corinthians 6:11, believing Christians are spoken of as being "washed," it is equally manifest that the word is used figuratively, and that they are washed in the sense of being cleansed from their sin and released from its consequences by the saving efficacy of the blood of Christ.

The literal language of Scripture is to be preferred, unless otherwise demanded by the context, parallel passages, or analogy. Apply the simple rules of grammar, as directed by a wide-awake common sense, and take for granted that the Bible means just what it says. True, we are warned that the letter killeth, and the spirit giveth life; but we are also told that every jot and tittle of the law is to be fulfilled. It is better to be unyieldingly literal than to adopt rationalistic interpretations of the gospel that make the Word of God of none effect. But we need the twofold caution: neither to add nor to take from, especially not to put into the Bible a doctrine that is not there. To find out just what the Bible says will require close study.

2. Ascertain the Meaning of Words as Used by Each Writer of the Scriptures.

All the writers do not give the same word exactly the same meaning. The usage of the writer and the connection in which it is used must determine the meaning of the particular word.

Take the word "faith" as an example. In Galatians 1:23; 1 Timothy 3:9; 4:1; Acts, 24:24 it means the gospel of which faith in Christ is the great doctrine. In Romans 3:3 it means truth or faithfulness—the fidelity of God in keeping His word. In Acts 17:31 it means proof or evidence. In Romans 14:23 it means a conscientious conviction of duty.

Again, take the word "flesh." In Ezekiel 11:19 it is used in contrast to stone. In John 1:14; Romans 1:3; 9:3 it refers to human nature without any reference to sinfulness. In Romans 8:13 and Ephesians 2:3 it points to human nature as both sinful and corrupt.

So is it with the word "salvation." In Exodus 14:13 it means outward safety and deliverance; in James 5:15 bodily healing; in Romans 13:11 the whole of the blessing which Christ has secured for believers. Sometimes it means simply the gospel, as in Hebrews 2:3.

a) *Sometimes the sense in which the word is used is made known or defined by the writer himself.*

In Hebrews 11, for instance, "faith" is first defined and then illustrated. It is said to be a confident expectation of things hoped for, a perfect persuasion of things not seen; and then examples are given of both parts of this definition.

The word "perfection"—over which so many are stumbling in this day—is clearly defined in the several parts of the Bible. In Psalms 37:37 it is used as being synonymous even with uprightness or sincerity, a real, unfeigned goodness, in opposition to sham goodness; and this is doubtless its real meaning in the Old Testament (1 Chronicles 12:33, 38). In the New Testament it means either the possession of clear and accurate knowledge of divine truth, or the possession of *all* the graces of Christian character in a higher or lower degree. The first is the meaning in Hebrews 5:14; 1 Corinthians 2:6; Philippians 3:15. The second is the meaning in James

1:4, R. V., where the word is defined as "entire, lacking nothing." In 2 Peter 1:5-7 the graces which characterize the perfect Christian are enumerated.

b) *Sometimes words are to be understood, according to the context, to mean the very opposite of their usual sense.*

In 1 Kings 22:15, "Go, and prosper" was spoken ironically, and meant the very reverse.

In Numbers 22:20 "Rise up, and go" appears from verses 12 and 32 to mean, "If, after all I have told you, your heart is set on violating My command, do it at your own risk."

The use of this form of speech may also be seen in 1 Kings 18:27; Judges 10:14; Mark 7:9; 1 Corinthians 4:8.

3. The Circumstances Peculiar to the Writer and Those Written to Must Be Taken into Consideration.

We should be more likely to translate literally what we find in the historical books than what we find in the poetical books. We should be more likely to emphasize chronology than the details of parables.

The student of the Scriptures must become well acquainted with the individuality of each writer, his style and mode of expression.

Under what circumstances were the words written, what the character of the people to whom they were addressed, and what state of moral sentiment prevailed at the time of writing? These, and other circumstances peculiar to each book and author, we must take cognizance of if we would become true and safe interpreters of the Bible.

4. The Analogy of Faith (Romans 12:6).

This term means the comparing of scripture with scripture in order to arrive at its true meaning. It at

once recognizes a divine unity running through the Scriptures, and is a proof of its inspiration.

The analogy of faith is identical with the phrase, "the whole tenor of Scripture." It is a gathering together of all the passages bearing upon any one subject and comparing them the one with the other, thereby arriving at the teaching of "the whole Scripture" on that given subject. If, for example, an expositor were to speak of justification by faith as though it freed us from obligation to holiness, such an interpretation must be rejected, because it contradicts the main design and spirit of the gospel.

In Proverbs 16:4 it is said, "The Lord hath made all things for himself; yea, even the wicked for the day of evil." The doctrine that the wicked were created that they might be condemned, which some have founded upon this passage, is inconsistent with innumerable parts of Scripture, and therefore cannot be true (see Psalm 145:9; Ezekiel 18:23; 2 Peter 3:9). The meaning, as determined by the analogy of faith, is that all evil shall contribute to the glory of God and promote the accomplishment of His adorable designs.

"The Scriptures being composed of several obscure texts of Scripture mingled with clear ones," said Boyle (1627-1691), "many devout persons have rather chosen to read other books, which, being free from difficulties, might promise more instruction; but as the moon, notwithstanding her spots, gives more light than the stars that are luminous, so the Scripture, notwithstanding its dark passages will afford a Christian more light than the best authors." "Make the Word of God as much as possible its own interpreter. You will best understand the Word of God by comparing it with itself, 'comparing spiritual things with spiritual.'"—*Bishop Newton*.

Thus we see that devout Christian men of all ages have been impressed with the necessity of reading the Word of God reverently, and comparing scripture with scripture.

5. A Knowledge of the Manners and Customs of the People to Whom the Bible Was Originally Written, is a Great Aid to the Student in its Interpretation.*

The houses of the poor in the east were generally made of mud, and thus become fitting images of the frailty of human life. This fact helps us to understand such passages as Job 24:16; Ezekiel 12:5, and Matthew 6:19.

The houses of the rich were of a more elaborate order, comprising porches, porticos, waiting-rooms, guest-chambers. The roof was flat, surrounded by a battlement of breastwork. In summer the people slept on the roof, and at all times it was used as a place of prayer and devotion. These facts explain the following and many other passages: Deuteronomy 22:8; 1 Samuel 9:25; 2 Samuel 11:2; Isaiah 22:1; Acts 10:9; Mark 13:15, and 2:4.

The dress of the Jews consisted commonly of two garments: the one a close-bodied frock or shirt, generally with long sleeves, and reaching a little below the knee, and later to the ankle, and the other a loose robe of some yards in length, fastened over the shoulders and thrown around the body. Within doors the first dress only was worn. It was regarded, however, as a kind of undress, in which it was not usual to pay visits, or to walk out. Hence persons clothed in it alone are said in Scripture to be naked (Isaiah 20:2-4; John 13:4 and 21:7), or to have laid aside their garments.

*See Bissell's *Biblical Antiquities*.

II. THE SOURCES OF THE INTERPRETATION OF THE TEXT.

The sources of interpretation are four, viz.: The text, the context, parallel passages, and resources outside of the text. It is absolutely necessary that these be taken into consideration by the student. In no other way can a correct exegesis of any portion of the sacred writings be obtained.

1. The Text Itself.

The first thing to be done in the study of any text is to find out what the text itself really teaches.

In this connection a knowledge of the *original languages* of the Bible is found exceedingly valuable. It affords the student an opportunity of ascertaining the various shades of meaning which are impossible to find in a translation. If you can, then, study the text in the language in which it was originally written. Find out the exact meaning of each word, phrase, and sentence. Let there be no hurry or haste in the matter. Such diligent and thorough study of the text you owe to God, to the Scriptures, to yourself, and to the people to whom you minister.

The student who is not able to read the text in the original need not therefore despair of being able to ascertain its true meaning, for the Revised Version comes to his help. In spite of its inconsistencies this version is beyond question a very good translation. Study the text in the Revised as well as in the Authorized Version. A comparison of 1 Thessalonians 4:15 in the Authorized and Revised Versions will illustrate the advantage of the latter. The word "prevent" in the Authorized is translated (correctly) "precede" in the Revised Version. The word originally meant "to go before," but words some-

This "help" is not recommended because of other difficulties concerning the Revised Version. Use of the other "helps" mentioned in this section would be a much wiser course to pursue. (See the prerequisite course on "The Bible".)

times become obsolete or change their meaning. Here is an illustration of the latter.

In our search for truth we should not be on the lookout for the brilliant and ingenious, but for the true. Nor should we sacrifice truth for brilliancy or for the sake of making an impression. We must not juggle with the Scriptures. In all things it behooves us as students and teachers to rightly divide the Word of truth.

One ought to remember also in this connection that invaluable help in the study of the text is to be found in the similarity between the Old and New Testament language of the same text. See and compare Psalm 8:3-8, with Hebrews 2:5-8.

For helps to the study of the *text itself* the use of grammatical concordances, such as Young's *Analytical*, and Strong's *Exhaustive Concordances*, and of grammatical commentaries, such as Jamieson, Fausset and Brown; Meyer; and Godet, are suggested.

2. The Context.

By the context is meant what goes before and what follows after the special portion of the sacred text under consideration.

To find the real context of a passage one may have to go back one or more chapters. Take, as an illustration, the seventh chapter of Romans. Before this chapter can be correctly interpreted it is necessary to go back to chapter one and grasp the thought of the whole book.

Another passage worth noticing is 2 Timothy 3:16. This verse is constantly quoted as a proof text for the inspiration of the whole Bible. It concerns the Old Testament only, the New Testament not as yet being written. It does announce the great truth that the Old Testament is inspired of God. We must look to other sources for proof of the inspiration of the New Testament.

Many interpreters neglect the context. They snatch a word out of its connection, and thus get a distorted view of scriptural teaching. Some time ago a sermon was preached on the text Hebrews 7:25. The preacher in a very brilliant manner sought to show the power of Christ to save the lowest and most degraded of sinners. Especially did he emphasize the word "uttermost" to prove the power of Christ. Now, this text does not prove Christ's ability to save sinners of the worst kind, although many other passages do (e. g., 1 Timothy 1:15; Luke 19:10, and Isaiah 1:18). Had the preacher read the context carefully he would not have chosen this passage as the text for such a theme. The context shows that this passage sets forth the difference between the priesthood of Christ and that of the Levites; they, by reason of death, could minister but temporarily; He, by reason of His ever living, is able to save (or minister) *for evermore*. The word "uttermost" is best translated "completely." The context demands such a translation (see R. V., margin).

Study the context. Read carefully what *goes before* and what *comes after* the passage you are seeking to expound. See also Matthew 5:48 (p. 80, c) and Hebrew 6:1.

3. The Use of Parallel Passages.

"Particular diligence should be used in comparing the parallel texts of the Old and New Testaments. It should be a rule with everyone who would read the Holy Scriptures with advantage and improvement, to compare every text which may seem either important for the doctrine it may contain or remarkable for the turn of expression with the parallel passages in other parts of Holy Writ, that is, with passages in which the subject matter is the same, the sense equivalent, or the turn of expression similar."—*Horsley*. Obscure words and phrases will thus become clear and plain.

God, for example, sometimes represents Himself as giving men to drink of a cup which He holds in His hand; they take it and fall prostrate to the ground in fearful intoxication. The figure is given with much brevity and with no word of explanation in some of the prophecies (Nahum 3:11; Habakkuk 2:16; Psalms 75:8). In Isaiah 51:17-23 it is fully explained, and the meaning of the figure becomes clear.

In Mark 8:36 we have the words: "For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" What is meant here by the word "soul"? The study of the parallel passage in Luke 9:25 throws light on the word. It reads as follows: "For what is a man advantaged, if he gain the whole world, and lose *himself*?" From these two passages we learn that "soul" and "himself" are equivalent. See and compare also Mark 11:8 with Matthew 21:8.

4. Resources Outside of the Text.

After the student has carefully and prayerfully studied the text, the context, and the parallel passages, he may safely read what other authorities have to say on the text. Cogitation first; the thoughts of others afterwards.

The resources outside of the text include commentaries, concordances, text expositions, word and subject indexes, and other library helps.

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