

Interpreting the Scriptures: The Key Rule

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An accurate interpretation and understanding of the Scriptures is the earnest desire of every sincere leader in Christ's Church. Without the Bible and an accurate understanding of what those Scriptures are saying, how can we possibly know what is truth? Therefore, it is of paramount importance to know how to rightly interpret God's Word.

So, how is this done? How can we have confidence that we are not being deceived in our interpretation of the Word? How can we avoid the fate of those who over the centuries have fallen into the trap of doctrinal error?

WHAT DO THE SCRIPTURES SAY?

First, it is interesting to note what the Scriptures don't say. There is no letter by Paul to the Berean church outlining "The Ten Rules of Hermeneutics." Paul and the other writers could have taken this approach, but they instead went down a different road to help their readers properly interpret the Scriptures. (In pointing this out, let me hasten to say that there is great value in detailing rules of interpretation, as I will soon explain. But it is noteworthy that neither Jesus, Paul, or any other writer took this approach.")

So what do the Scriptures say is the proper way to understand the Bible? The rule given in the Bible is a simple one: the rule of humility. God promises that He will make known His wisdom and His understanding to the one who has a believing and humble heart:

"At that time Jesus answered and said, 'I praise Thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that Thou didst hide these things from the wise and intelligent and didst reveal them to babes'" (Matthew 11:25).

"When pride comes, then comes dishonor, but with the humble is wisdom" (Proverbs 11:2).

"But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all men generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea driven and tossed by the wind" (James 1:5-6).

IS IT REALLY THAT SIMPLE?

Yes, it is really that simple. But that doesn't mean it's easy. Humility usually involves hard work and, oftentimes, much sacrifice. And humility in a person's life will be demonstrated in many ways. If a person is truly humble, he will be humble in at least three ways:

1. He will be humble toward God and His Word
2. He will be humble toward the inspired writers of the Scriptures
3. He will be humble toward the rest of the body of Christ

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Humility toward God and His Word If a person is truly humble toward God and His Word, the following will be true:

1. He will acknowledge that he has no ability apart from God's grace to understand the Scriptures.
"I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me, and I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).
2. He will read the Bible not to justify his own personal biases, but with an honest and good heart to genuinely understand the mind of God.
"but we have renounced the things hidden because of shame, not walking in craftiness or adulterating the word of God, but by the manifestation of truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God" (2 Corinthians 4:2).
3. He will come to the Scriptures with the attitude of obeying what he reads.
"If any man is willing to do His will, he shall know of the teaching, whether it is of God, or whether I speak from Myself" (John 7:17).
4. He will diligently read and study the entire Bible before jumping to conclusions or settling on a doctrinal issue, realizing that God does not contradict Himself. The humble man will listen to God thoroughly, hearing all that He has to say before coming to conclusions.
"All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16, 17).

Humility toward the inspired writers of the Scriptures If a person is humble towards the writers of the Scriptures, the following will be true:

1. With a humble and listening heart, he will take the time to find out what that writer really meant when he used the specific words he used. This would likely mean understanding the usage of that term in the Greek or Hebrew language during that writer's time.
2. He will take the time to understand the literary style that the writer was using and what he was intending to communicate. Was it history? Was it poetry? Was it prophecy?
3. The humble and listening person will study and research the historical setting in which that writer wrote, to better understand what that writer was intending to communicate.
4. The humble and listening person will read the writer's words in context, again to better comprehend what the writer is saying.

5. The person with a genuinely humble and listening heart will do all he can to understand the real intent behind the writer's words. Were they meant to be taken literally? Or were they meant to be taken allegorically? The humble person will not come with preconceived notions either way, but will, in a sense, go and sit at the feet of that writer and listen to and receive words from that writer in the way he intended his words to be received.

Humility toward the rest of the body of Christ If a person is truly humble toward the rest of the body of Christ, the following will be true:

1. He will take the time to consider the interpretations of other believers in Christ, not only from this era but from centuries past.
2. He will allow his interpretations to be critiqued by other believers in Christ, for fear of missing God's mind on the matter at hand.
"And it was because of a revelation that I went up; and I submitted to them the gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but I did so in private to those who were of reputation, for fear that I might be running, or had run, in vain" (Galatians 2:2).
3. He will grow in his love and respect for all believers (including those with whom he disagrees), realizing that God supernaturally gives wisdom to His body as the Church grows in love and unity.
"that their hearts may be encouraged, having been knit together in love, and attaining to all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, resulting in a true knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ Himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Colossians 2:2-3).
4. If he has an interpretation of Scripture which is not held by the body of Christ in general, he may communicate his views with conviction, but not with the dogmatism he would communicate more essential doctrines (such as the deity of Christ or salvation by faith). Because of his respect for God's working through his brothers and sisters in Christ, he will be slow to develop his convictions where there is not a general consensus in the universal Church of Christ. He realizes that the fact that there is not unity is a possible indication that God has not made things abundantly clear on the issue, or the issue is not a very important one for the overall purposes of God. (An example of this is the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 where biblical interpretations and practices were determined and settled only after the body of Christ at large agreed on those issues.)

HUMILITY AND HERMENEUTICS

The person who is familiar with the rules of hermeneutics taught in seminaries and Bible schools will doubtless point out that I have merely restated these rules in a different manner (such as reading passages in context and comparing Scripture with Scripture, etc.). The issue, however, is not primarily one of hermeneutics, but of humility. We must continually emphasize this truth that God grants wisdom to the one who walks by the “rule of humility,” who trusts in the grace of God for understanding. The one who so walks will work out this humility by practicing hermeneutical rules taught in Bible school classes. These hermeneutical rules (as described in the next article) are extremely important to follow. But let us be careful that we do not fall into the trap of thinking that we can obtain wisdom by trusting in our efforts to obey a predetermined “Ten Rules of Hermeneutics” any more than we can obtain salvation by obeying the Ten Commandments. God’s wisdom, like salvation, comes not because of our works but is a gift given to those with humble faith who show their faith by their works.

The rule is a simple one. God grants grace and wisdom to the humble. Therefore, pursue humility towards God and His Word, towards the inspired writers of the Scriptures, and towards the body of Christ. Then rest assured that the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ will Himself “*give you understanding in everything*” (2 Timothy 2:7).