

Introduction

The six verses I just read have something in common? It's that most Christians, including pastors and writers, misunderstand them. Examples abound. Referring to Proverbs 22:6, for instance, a mother blames herself for her adult son rejecting Jesus. Tony Campolo and Robert Schuller quote Proverbs 29:18 in several of their books and urge us to set goals in our lives. A Friends pastor read Psalm 46:10 and preached about having quiet times with God. Citing Matthew 5:32, an abused wife decided not to divorce her husband. And finally, a televangelist quoted Philippians 4:13 and declared to Larry King that if Christians can dream it, they can do it. The problem is that none of those verses mean what those Christians think they mean.

That teaches us something. To understand the Bible, we need to interpret it correctly and that's what I'm going to preach about today.

Interpret Correctly

Notice I said "need to." We do need to interpret it correctly and here's why. It's because of a sequence that's built into the very fabric of our lives. Interpretation leads to understanding and understanding is the basis of feeling and action. How we interpret determines how we understand, which determines how we feel and act.

Suppose I say to you, "**I have cold feet.**" If you interpret that literally, that my feet are actually cold, you'll give me a warmer pair of socks. But if you interpret that figuratively, that I'm nervous about doing something, you'll speak words of encouragement to me instead.

That illustrates the sequence. Interpretation leads to understanding and understanding is the basis of feeling and action. How we interpret determines how we understand, which determines how we feel and act.

That sequenced is profoundly impacting, especially with regard to the Bible. Since the Bible is God's word, those of us who take Him

infinitely seriously, take it infinitely seriously. That in turn makes that sequence especially person and life impacting when it comes to the Bible.

Take my mother for instance. As a young woman, she went forward in a church service to “get saved” as we used to say it. Several seasoned Christians then read 1 Timothy 2:9-10 and counseled her not to wear her wedding ring anymore. They told her that diamonds aren’t “modest” and “discreet,” to quote verse 9, and that it would be a sin to wear it. So she took it off and didn’t wear it again until years later, when she finally knew better, on the day of my father’s funeral.

The moral of that story is this. If we interpret the Bible incorrectly, we misunderstand it, which makes us feel and act wrongly. But if we interpret it correctly, we understand it, which makes us feel and act rightly. That’s a sequence in life that none of us can escape or avoid.

So, interpret it correctly. That is our call. Interpret it correctly.

Now, to interpret the Bible correctly means to determine the plain meaning of the text. When I say “text,” I mean the verse or passage we’re reading. To interpret a text correctly means to determine its plain meaning. That plain meaning is what its original writer intended to say.

Many if not most Christians don’t grasp that. How many times have you heard Christians talk about what a text “**means to me**”? But the truth is that what it “**means to me**” has nothing to do with what it “**really means.**” What it really means is what it meant to the original writer, not what it means to me. To understand a text, we have to interpret it correctly. And to interpret it correctly, we have to determine what its original writer actually intended to say.

Now that we know what it means to interpret the Bible correctly, let’s do just that. Let’s interpret it correctly. There are three things that we need to do in order to accomplish that.

Concentrate and Use Good Sense

First, concentrate and use good sense. Concentration and good sense enable us to correctly interpret most texts spontaneously. In John

6:48, for instance, Jesus said, "**I am the bread of life.**" How many of you have ever read that text? How many of you took it to mean that Jesus is a loaf of bread? None! You interpreted it figuratively not literally. You correctly took it to mean that He is to us spiritually as bread is to us physically. *Most* texts are like that. We can correctly interpret them spontaneously by concentrating and using good sense.

Concentrating and using good sense means two things.

First, we interpret the Bible objectively. All of us have biases. Biases are things that we assume or want to be true. Many Christians bring their biases to the text. They manipulate it to mean what they assume or want it to mean. Take Malachi 3:10 for instance, which commands the whole tithe to be brought into the storehouse. Pastors normally want their congregants to give their tithes to the church. So they manipulate the text and interpret "storehouse" to mean the local church. It's called *Storehouse Tithing*. But that isn't what it means.

Don't do that kind of thing. Interpret the Bible as objectively as you can. Don't bring the meaning to the text. Get the meaning from the text.

Concentrating and using good sense means a second thing. We interpret the Bible contextually. Every verse in the Bible has four basic contexts: the entire Bible, the Testament it's in, the book it's in, and the passage it's in. The passage it's in is called immediate context and is the verses right before and after it. The single biggest mistake that Christians make with the Bible is taking verses out of context, interpreting them in isolation from those four contexts.

Take that sermon from Psalm 46:10 about having quiet times with God. Its immediate context, the verses right before and after it, show it has nothing to do with Christians or their quiet times with God. The pastor misinterpreted it because he took it out of that context. He failed to concentrate on the verses right before and after it. That's also why the televangelist misinterpreted Philippians 4:13 as well.

It's a fundamental principle. Scripture interprets Scripture. So,

interpret verses contextually.

That then is what it means to concentrate and use good sense. We interpret the Bible objectively and contextually. We can correctly interpret *most* texts spontaneously by doing that.

But *not all* texts. There are many important texts in the Bible that we cannot interpret correctly by just concentrating and using good sense. We need to do more, specifically two things.

Bridge Gaps

First, bridge the gaps. In many texts, there are distances or gaps between the original writers and readers and us. And we have to bridge those gaps to interpret the texts correctly. There are three such gaps.

The first is historical gap. We are widely separated in time from the original writers and readers. We often don't know historical facts that explain the plain meaning of a text. Why did Jonah, for instance, not want to preach to Nineveh? It was because of the political and economic climate of his day. So, we have to bridge the historical gap and know that climate. We can't understand the message of his book if we don't.

The second gap is cultural gap. There are significant differences between the cultures of the original writers and readers and our own. We often don't know cultural facts that explain the plain meaning of a text. Two cultural facts underlie Jesus' teaching on divorce in Matthew 5:32, for instance: the options that divorced women had in the first century and first century divorce law. So, we have to bridge the cultural gap and know those facts. We'll misunderstand His teaching if we don't.

The third gap is linguistic gap. The meaning of words and phrases, the grammar, and the structure of the original Biblical languages are often very different than that of the English language. We often don't know linguistic facts that explain the plain meaning of a text. Proverbs 29:18 is an example of what I mean. Our English language defines the word "vision" as objective or goal. But the Hebrew language defined it as revelation from God. So, we have to bridge the linguistic gap and know

that definition. We'll misinterpret the verse, like Tony Campolo and Robert Schuller do, if we don't.

You can see how vital it is in many texts to bridge gaps. If we don't, we'll either not understand them or worse yet misunderstand them. That's what the wife of the abusive husband did. She didn't bridge the cultural gap and misunderstood Matthew 5:32 as a result. It's clear then. Bridging gaps is absolutely essential to interpreting many texts correctly.

But how do we do that? The answer is outside resources. Those resources are the following: a good Bible dictionary (*The New Bible Dictionary*), a good Bible handbook (*Eerdman's Handbook to the Bible*), a good translation (*NASB, NIV, KJV, NKJV*), and a good commentary (*The Tyndale Commentaries*). We should have each of those. Then when we think there's a gap in a text, we should consult them and bridge it. We'll be able to interpret it correctly and thus understand it if we do.

Follow the Rules for Interpreting Genres

There's a second thing we need to do to interpret many texts correctly. Follow the rules for interpreting genres. Genres are nothing more than literary forms. The primary genres in the Bible are narrative, law, poetry, proverb, prophecy, parable, epistle, and apocalypse. Each book in the Bible is in one or more of those literary forms. Deuteronomy is primarily narrative and law. Psalms is entirely poetry. Matthew is primarily narrative and parable. Galatians, except for 4:27, is epistle. And so on.

Now, each genre has different rules of interpretation that are peculiar to it. If we know and follow those rules, we're able to interpret it texts correctly. But if we don't, we aren't able to. We end up not understanding or even misunderstanding them instead.

Take the book of *Proverbs* for instance. Its genre is entirely proverb, which gives it its name in fact. Proverb has special rules of interpretation. One of those is that individual proverbs are general rules not divine guarantees. They mention an action and then the blessings,

rewards, and opportunities that will usually but not always follow.

Listen to Proverbs 22:6 again, "*Train up a child in the way he should go, Even when he is old he will not depart from it.*" Based on what I just said, interpret that verse. Is it a divine guarantee? No, it is not. So, it doesn't mean that if we raise our children well in Jesus, they'll *always* follow Him as adults. Ezekiel 18 confirms that fact. Is verse 6 a general rule? Yes, it is. So, it does mean that if we raise our children well in Jesus, they'll *usually* follow Him as adults. Mass communication of course, and the resulting pervasiveness of secular culture, impacts that rule. It makes it less generally true than it was.

That explains why the Christian mother I mentioned earlier feels so guilty about her adult son rejecting Jesus. She interprets 22:6 incorrectly as a divine guarantee. So, even though she raised him very well, she concludes and logically so that she didn't.

Her unfounded guilt demonstrates what we need to do. Learn and follow the rules for interpreting the genres in the Bible. I've written a study titled *Biblesmiths* that can help you do just that.

Conclusion

I close with an observation. The Holy Spirit wrote the Bible. Interpreting it, therefore, is primarily His work not ours. But we do have a part to play in it. Our part is to give Him something to work with. If we don't give Him something to work with, He won't be able to teach us what He wants to. Those people I mentioned at the beginning of the sermon demonstrate exactly what I mean. They're sincere followers of Jesus and have the Holy Spirit. But they misinterpreted the texts.

So, let's give the Holy Spirit something to work with. Let's do three things. First, concentrate and use good sense. Interpret texts objectively and contextually. Second, bridge gaps when there are ones. And third, follow the rules for interpreting the genres in the Bible when we need to. Do those three things. With the Holy Spirit's help, we'll understand the Bible if we do.