

TRUEish Series – Part 2

Principles of Interpretation

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Good Morning! I am excited to continue our series this morning called True-ish. The vision behind this particular study is to give you some tools, six of them, to help you to discern the difference between what is true and what it only true-ish.

Because honestly, most of the lies that we believe are not bold-faced lies. They aren't obvious. If they were obvious, we wouldn't believe them. We have a perfect example of this in the garden.

Satan says to Adam and Eve,

“Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden’?”

He doesn't reject that there is a God, or a garden or a tree or that there may have been instructions about what trees to eat. He is simply taking all of those facts and slightly distorting them. He just says it a little different. He asks a question adding the word “really”.

I think in the same way there is probably a large majority of people in the room today that would agree that there is a God, and like we covered last week that he has spoken authoritatively through his word, the bible. That the bible is inspired by God.

2 Peter 1:21

²⁰ Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation of things. ²¹ For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

2 Timothy 3:16

¹⁶ All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,

So how is it that if you believe that and I believe that, that there are so many different perspectives on what is true in the bible?

People who believe the bible is the infallible, authoritative word of God, they are digging into the bible sincerely to know the truth and honor God with their lives. Why are we then so often divided by things like, baptism, end times, and worship?

The bible is the word of God. When you read it, it is his word. You are also reading a translation of his word. The bible was not originally written in English. It was translated into English from Hebrew and Greek sources. Sometimes when you translate from one language to another it is really difficult to translate word by word. Or translating humor or a colloquialism, “that's like

the pot calling the kettle back.” It’s really hard to know what that means when it’s translated into another culture and another language. I never knew what it meant anyway.

I want to read a few quotes from the book “How to read the bible for all its worth.” By Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart.

“Historically the church has understood that nature of scripture much the same as it has understood the person of Christ; the bible is at the same time both human and divine.”

“because the bible is God’s message, it has eternal relevance; it speaks to all humankind, in every language, time and culture in which it was originally written.”

“because God chose to speak his word through human words in history, every book in the bible also has historical particularity; each document is conditioned by the language, time and culture in which it was originally written.”

“Interpretation of the bible is demanded by the “tension” that exists between its eternal relevance and its historical particularity.”

Thus, the task of interpreting involves the student/reader at two levels. First, one has to hear the words they heard; we must try to understand what was said to them back *then and there*. Secondly, we must learn to hear that same word in the here and now.

1. Sound biblical interpretation requires us to discover the original, intended meaning.

If we believe that the bible is God’s word for us today, then we certainly believe that it was God’s word for them then. This is an exciting truth that the bible was written for them, just as much as it was written for us. So, the discipline of good interpretation starts with understanding when the biblical writer was trying to communicate to the original audience.

It’s one thing to interpret a writing from one language to another, then add to that that the cultures and civilization in which the writing takes place in haven’t existed for more that 2,000 years.

That’s the tension of interpreting some parts of the bible. It can be difficult. That’s why we start with understanding the original intent.

When I first learned this method, it was completely new to me. I, like most of us, would read the bible with a self-focused filter. I wasn’t always asking the questions, “what is God saying?” I was asking the question, “what is God saying to me?” I wasn’t aware that the bible is so much more than that.

Have you ever flipped open your bible and put your finger down somewhere randomly and be like, “God, I’ll do whatever you say!!”?

**Ask me,
and I will make the nations your inheritance,
the ends of the earth your possession.**

**May the favor of the Lord our God rest on us;
establish the work of our hands for us—
yes, establish the work of our hands.**

**There was a man all alone;
he had neither son nor brother.
There was no end to his toil,**

Go and sin no more

Here's the crazy part. Because I believe that the bible is actually God's word, I not only believe it, but I know that while doing that doesn't always pan out so well, sometimes it does. Sometimes God uses things in the bible to bring correction and encouragement.

But what about answering some of the really difficult things of life? Looking to scripture to answer so hard questions, the answers aren't just about me, but they are about all Christians, when the answer affects people's lives in significant ways. Like if you should stay married, if you are really saved.

That's why we look at the bible this way to really understand the original intent of the writing to the original audience. This takes some work, but it is encouraging how much clarity it brings to even some very difficult passages.

How do you do this?

The best you can do is to sit down to read the bible with no agenda. Learn about the author, history, culture, and reason the book was written (many bibles have some of this information written at the beginning of each chapter). Read the book in its entirety. Break it down into chunks of thought. Underline what seems to be the important themes.

I don't want you to think that in any way we are suggesting that God's word doesn't or can't just speak to you and minister to you.

2. Sound biblical interpretation requires us to understand Customs.

I want to show you an example in scripture about how 1st Century custom is so obviously written into the text and how we must be willing to look on the principle of what is being taught and not the custom.

John 13:12-17

¹² When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. “Do you understand what I have done for you?” he asked them. ¹³ “You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am. ¹⁴ Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. ¹⁵ I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. ¹⁶ Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. ¹⁷ Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

Is Jesus expecting that we would all wash each other’s feet? If so, how often? Could you imagine if we all had to wash each other’s feet?

Or is he using a custom to reinforce a principle of humble service?

Let me give you another example:

2 Corinthians 13:12

¹² Greet one another with a holy kiss.

Story about my friend...

The bible was written in a time when these were the custom. We don’t believe that every Christian needs to live as though it was the 1st Century to be a Christian.

3. Sound biblical interpretation requires us to understand Context.

Historical Context

Historical Context will greatly determine how we interpret the scripture. Knowing a little bit about the exile helps us to better understand many of the minor prophets, understanding what was happening in Corinth as opposed to Philippi help us understand Paul’s letter better.

Historical context is extremely helpful in understanding some of the comments Paul writes about women being silent in the church, women not speaking in the church. Understand the historical backdrop, the extreme pagan feminist culture that Paul was writing to in Ephesus.

It may not outright cause you to change your opinion on the subject but add to that that throughout the old and new testament there are accounts of women in leadership. In the same book 1 Corinthians in chapter 11:5 Paul talks about women praying and prophesying in a communal gathering. It also says in chapter 14:34 that women should be silent.

Is the bible contradicting itself? Is Paul confused? No, there is obviously something else going on.

So we must understand the historical context.

Secondly is the literary context.

Literary context

Literary context means this. You can't take one line out of a story and make it mean something that it was never meant to mean.

Do not judge, or you too will be judged.

Matthew 7

7 “Do not judge, or you too will be judged. ²For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

³“Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? ⁴How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye?⁵You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.

⁶“Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces.

These comments sound pretty judgmental. He’s even calling people names. Another great example of this point is found in Matthew.

Matthew 7:15-20

¹⁵“Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. ¹⁶By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. ¹⁹Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

Are we supposed to be a judgmental people in spirit, harsh, and measuring? No. We are called to make functional judgments. We don’t ignore bad fruit, we don’t throw our hand up and say, “Well, I’m not supposed to judge so, they can do whatever they want”.

Understanding the biblical context both historical and literary is so helpful in understanding what God is really saying in his word.

4. Sound biblical interpretation requires us to understand original language.

There are words or phrases in the bible that can change the meaning of the sentence depending on how you interoperate the words. It’s helpful to consult an expert on the original

language like a commentary written by a credible theologian or a resource like the Strong's Concordance.

1 Corinthians 6:19-20

¹⁹Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; ²⁰you were bought at a price. Therefore, honor God with your bodies.

The you in this scripture is a plural you. The intent for this scripture is not merely for an individual person. It is to help us understand how we function as a church.

Original, intended meaning.

Customs.

Context.

Original language.

Stand with me. I hope that this was helpful to you. We want to give you some tools during the series so that you can discern for yourself the difference between what is true and what is true-ish.

One other thing we have is each other. We have pastors and elders, and fellow believers to help us sort these things out.

One thing that I do know is that this bible makes a promise that I now know it's true. If you will live your life by this book and trust what it says, it will without questions lead you to know who God is. To experience real forgiveness because of his son Jesus. You will be given a clean heart and clear conscious. It will show you how to live an honorable life before God. It will direct you into the plans and purposes he has for your life. And ultimately on the day you die, you will walk directly into the presence of Jesus himself in heaven.

Prayer Ministers

Prayer