Hermeneutics Workshop 03:
Principles of Interpretation
For the Bible Institute at GCBC **Fall 2026**
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Introduction:

Hermeneutics is important because the Bible is divine revelation. God has chosen to communicate through human authors to specific audiences. God's Word has meaning, and it is meant to be understood. There are many challenges to interpretation because we are separated from the biblical text in multiple ways. These challenges are often ignored or overlooked, and that can lead to poor interpretation of Scripture. We should seek to identify these challenges, and then apply good principles of interpretation to these challenges in order to find the true meaning of the text. Principles of interpretation are the basic rules or guidelines that govern how we determine the true meaning of a biblical text.

Course Overview:

- Week 1: Introduction: Why does Hermeneutics Matter?
  - **Homework: Choose a Passage**
- Week 2: Challenges of Interpretation
  - **Homework: Identify interpretive challenges**
- Week 3: Principles of Interpretation
  - **Homework: Establish interpretive principles**
- Week 4: Systems of Interpretation
  - **Homework: Consider theological/systematic assumptions**
- Week 5: Historical Interpretation: Bible Context
  - **Homework: Research surrounding context**
- Week 6: Historical Interpretation: Cultural Context
  - **Homework: Research cultural context**
- Week 7: Grammatical Interpretation: Genre
  - **Homework: Analyze literary genre**
- Week 8: Grammatical Interpretation: Grammar & Syntax
  - **Homework: Analyze grammar and syntax**
- Week 9: Grammatical Interpretation: Word Study
  - **Homework: Pick a word and conduct a word study**
- Week 10: Application: What Did it Mean to Them?
  - **Homework: Determine original meaning/application**
- Week 11: Application: What Does it Mean for the Church?
  - **Homework: Present a brief interpretation and application**

- **Free Online Resources:**
  - Blue Letter Bible
  - Bible Hub

Principle 1: Interpret According to Authorial Intent

The human writers intended to communicate something when they wrote down the words of Scripture. The intended meaning of the human writer is communicated through the actual words of the text. We do not have to know the thoughts or feelings of the human writer in order to understand what they intended to communicate. The text itself is where we are always able to find the author's intent. This means we do not have to guess what the author "probably" meant, but rather we can come to understand their clear intent without having to guess. This principle of authorial intent also means that Scripture cannot mean whatever the reader wants it to mean. The original audience is important, and understanding things about the original audience can help us know how they would have understood the author's intended meaning.

The author's purpose for writing is a key aspect of authorial intent. Thankfully, the human writer often tells us either directly or indirectly what their purpose for writing was. John often made it very clear what his purpose for writing was. John said his purpose for writing the Gospel of John was "that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name" (John 20:31). John said that his purpose for writing I John was "that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God" (I John 5:13). John made his purpose for writing very clear in both of these books. John intended to reveal the identity of Jesus Christ in the Gospel of John. This is helpful for determining authorial intent while reading the Gospel of John. John 2 contains a narrative that is often separated from the authorial intent of the passage. Jesus turns water into wine in John 2, and many have decided to make the wine the main focus of that passage. However, the main focus of that passage is Jesus. John is not intending to give instructions about whether or not alcohol is okay to drink, but rather John is intending to reveal that Jesus is the Son of God by the fact that He can performs miracles that only God can do. Belief in Jesus Christ is not an incidental theme through the Gospel of John, but rather it is the main stated purpose of John himself. Paul is not as direct as John when it comes to stating his purpose for writing, but Paul still typically makes his purpose for writing clear through indirect statements. Paul says to the Galatians, "I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel" (Galatians 1:6). Paul starts off his letter to the Galatians by identifying his motivation for writing to them. Paul was writing to correct false teaching and this other gospel that had crept into their beliefs. Paul defends salvation by grace through faith apart from the deeds of the law. Paul's purpose and intent are revealed through the words of the text itself. The overall argument of the human writer controls the meaning of the individual statements found throughout the book. The overall argument of the human writer also controls the meaning of the individual words throughout the book. Words can mean many different things, but the intended meaning of the author is the one that actually matters. Understanding the author's main purpose for writing is key for determining authorial intent.

The principle of authorial intent does not mean the human writer always understood everything that God intended to communicate. The human author intended to communicate something when they wrote down the words of Scripture, but the human author may have not understood the full significance of what God was revealing through him. Old Testament prophecy illustrates this concept well. The Old Testament prophets did not always understand the full significance of the prophecies that they wrote down. I Peter 1:10-11 says, "Of which salvation the prophets have enquired and searched diligently, who prophesied of the grace that should come unto you: Searching what, or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them did signify, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should

follow." The Old Testament prophets understood some of the significance of what they prophesied, but they searched deep into their own prophecies to try to determine the full significance of them. This ought to remind us that God is the ultimate Author of Scripture. If Isaiah did not fully understand everything he prophesied, then that does not mean that Isaiah's prophecies cannot have meaning beyond Isaiah's immediate understanding. God is the ultimate Author of Scripture which means that authorial intended ultimately comes back to God's intended meaning for the text.

The principle of authorial intent means that one passage has one intended meaning. This is a foundational principle for proper interpretation of Scripture. A passage does not have two meanings that are equally valid. A passage can have multiple applications, multiple doctrinal implications, multiple levels of significance, and even prophetic fulfillment that unfolds over time. However, a passage cannot have multiple intended meanings that are all equally valid. The principle of authorial intent means that a passage has one intended meaning, and we must study to identify that one intended meaning.

Principle 2: Interpret According to Context

Context determines the intended meaning of the text. We must examine context before we can determine the intended meaning of the text. Each individual passage is part of a larger whole. This means that we need to examine the immediate context, the book context, and the whole context of Scripture.

The principle of interpreting a passage according to the immediate context can protect us from many of the interpretative errors that people make. Jeremiah 29:11is a classic example of a verse that is often pulled out of its immediate context. It says, "For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the LORD, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end." This verse sounds really nice, and people immediately apply it to themselves. However, the LORD is not speaking to you in this verse. The LORD is speaking to the Israelites in Babylonian captivity in this verse. The immediate context would make this clear, but people miss the context when they just quote a single verse. People would just have to read one verse before in order to know who God is speaking to in this verse. That is why we always need to know the immediate context of a verse before we interpret or apply that verse.

The principle of interpreting a passage according to the book context can help us properly identify the main point of the passage. Proverbs 11:30 is an example of a verse that is sometimes separated for its book context. It says, "The fruit of the righteous *is* a tree of life; and he that winneth souls *is* wise." This verse has sometimes been pulled out of its book context which leads to a much more narrow interpretation than the book context would suggest. To say that this verse refers directly to our modern terminology of "soul-winning" is to pull this verse out of its book context. Proverbs is a book about wise living. Proverbs 11 repeatedly contrasts the righteous and the wicked, especially in how their conduct affects other people. The righteous person has a life-giving influence, and gains people through wise conduct. This verse is not establishing "soul-winning" as a technical term for New Testament evangelism. Solomon wrote these proverbs well before "soul-winning" was a term for evangelism, and considering the book context should help us avoid poor interpretation.

The principle of interpreting a passage according to whole context of Scripture helps us make sure that we interpret the passage in accordance with the rest of Scripture. James 2:17-26 is an example of a passage that some people struggle to fit with the rest of Scripture. James 2:24 says, "Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only." If this was the

only verse we had about justification in all of Scripture, then we might conclude that we are made righteous through works. However, we have many more verses about justification that tells us that we are justified by faith apart from works. Does Scripture contradict? Do Paul and James disagree about how we are justified? These are questions the interpreter has to ask himself. Paul is teaching that we are made righteous through faith, and James is teaching that we are shown to be righteous through works. Works reveal the faith that is already there. James says that Abraham was justified by works when he offered Isaac upon the altar, but that happened after Abraham was already counted to be righteous when he believed God. Abraham's works justified or revealed his faith that was already there. So accounting for the whole context of Scripture will help us from jumping to a wrong interpretation of a specific passage.

Principle 3: Interpret Literally/Normally According to Genre

The intended meaning of the text is communicated according to the normal meaning of the language and the literary form being used. "Literal" interpretation does not mean everything must be interpreted woodenly. Literal interpretation is understanding the words in their normal sense while also allowing for figurative language and literary devices.

John 15 is an example of a passage that should be interpreted literally, but not woodenly. John 15:5 says, "I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing." Jesus is teaching an important truth that we should take literally. However, a wooden interpretation would conclude that Jesus is actually a grapevine, and that we are actually branches. That is an example of what some people that argue against a literal interpretation point to. They say that a passage like this shows that we cannot interpret Scripture literally, and that is right to interpret Scripture allegorically. However, "literal" interpretation simply means interpreting Scripture normally. We should interpret Scripture normally, and we should not try to find hidden meanings in the text. Figures of speech, metaphors, and similes are all normal literary devices. These literary devices do not mean that all of Scripture can be interpreted figuratively or allegorically. The normal reading of John 15 points to the fact that Jesus is using a metaphor to describe our relationship to Him. We should avoid an overly-wooden interpretation of Scripture, and we should also avoid an overly-spiritualized interpretation of Scripture. We should interpret every passage of Scripture according to the normal reading of the passage.

Principle 4: Scripture Interprets Scripture

Comparing Scripture with Scripture helps us determine what a passage cannot mean. However, this principle of interpretation is often mishandled. Cross-referencing multiple Scripture passages without considering each of their individual contexts often leads to poor interpretation of Scripture.

Scripture helps us understand Scripture. The best commentary on the Bible is the Bible. Sometimes New Testament passages give us more insight into Old Testament passages. Sometimes the Gospels complement each other to help us better understand all the details of a narrative. Sometimes there are passages that present the same topic in a more clear way. It is appropriate to use clearer passages to help us understand less clear passages, but only if we are respecting each passage's own context. Someone can make Scripture say whatever they want it to say if they are just cross-referencing without context. We should use cross-references when we are studying Scripture, but we must take the time to understand each passage in its own context.

Paul frequently uses Old Testament passages of Scripture to support a point. Romans 4:1-8 is a passage that shows how Scripture interprets Scripture. Paul quotes both Genesis 15:6 and Psalm 32:1-2. Paul uses both of these passages to show that justification has never been by works. Genesis 15:6 focuses on how Abraham's faith was counted to him for righteousness apart from works. Psalm 32:1-2 focuses on how a man's sin can be covered apart from works. These passages provide two different sides of justification. Justification involves forgiveness of sins and imputation of righteousness. Multiple passages of Scripture that speak about a specific doctrine provide more clarity and information on that doctrine. Using Scripture to interpret Scripture can help us see the big picture what of Scripture teaches about a specific truth. Using Scripture to interpret Scripture also helps protect us from misinterpreting a difficult passage of Scripture.

It is important that we do not try to change the main point of a specific passage because of cross-referencing. There are so many good truths in Scripture, but if you are expositing a specific passage, then you should teach the truth that passages teaches. The narrative of Jesus calming the storm is an example of passage that is often used to teach a separate point than the main point of that passage. This is a story where people like to quickly jump to an application about how Jesus can calm the storms in your life or how Jesus can calm the storm in your mind. It is true that Jesus can provide you with peace, but the peace that Jesus gives is not dependent on the absence of storms. The main point of this narrative is for the disciples and for those reading to see that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. Jesus performed many unique and wonderful miracles during his ministry, but the point of that was not for us to focus on the miracles. The miracles are meant to manifest the identity of Jesus. Jesus performed miracles that only God could do; therefore, Jesus must be God. It is true that Jesus provides us with peace, and that Jesus wants you to experience His peace. However, there are passages that clearly teach that point and that do not have to be allegorized. John 14:27 is a great verse where Jessus teaches us about the peace that He offers us. Philippians 4:6-8 is a great passage that teaches us how to access the peace that Jesus offers us. There are so many wonderful truths in Scripture, but we need to make sure we are teaching the truth that specific passage teaches. We should not just be cross-referencing in another good biblical truth and making that the main point of a different passage.

Principle 5: Distinguish Interpretation From Application

Distinguishing interpretation from application is a key aspect of good hermeneutics. A passage can have one interpretation, but it can also have multiple applications. The interpretation does not change according to the modern reader, but the application may change according to different circumstances. We must always start with interpretation before we can move to proper application.

Jesus calming the storm is once again a good illustration of this principle. The main point of that narrative is that Jesus Christ is the Son of God that has power over His creation. However, there are multiple applications that can be made from that main point. The first application is that Jesus is God and I should believe on Him. There are some other secondary applications that can be appropriate. Jesus is God, and therefore He is bigger than the trials in my life. Jesus is God, and therefore I can trust Him even if I am in a situation that makes me fearful. Jesus is God, and He is in control of the trials that He allows into my life. Jesus is God, and He cares about me. The central truth that Jesus Christ is the Son of God can have endless applications to the specific circumstances of your life. The key is that we recognize the difference between interpretation and application. We do not have to allegorize the story in

order for the central truth to have powerful applications for our lives. An application that is dangerous from this passage is the idea that Jesus will remove any trial in your life if you just ask Him. Jesus does not promise to miraculously deliver us out of the hard circumstances of our lives, and Jesus only did that in this story as part of the revelation of His identify as the Son of God. This illustrates the importance of identifying the main point of the passage before moving to applications from the passage. The main point of the passage puts guardrails on what applications are appropriate. Saying that Jesus will calm the all storms in your life if you just ask is neither true nor helpful. Proper interpretation limits the applications to things that are actually true and helpful.

Old Testament narratives can be some of the most misused passages because of failure to properly interpret before applying. David and Goliath is another classic example of this principle. The main point of many sermons from the story of David and Goliath is that God will help you defeat the giants in your life. This is an example of allegorizing a narrative and applying it without interpreting it first. The reality is that the narrative of David and Goliath takes place in the context of a much larger narrative. Before this passage, God had already chosen David to be the next king of Israel. After this passage, God will further reveal the scope of His plans and purposes for David and His people. Goliath is not the focus of this story, but rather the faithfulness of God is the focus. God was faithful to David and His people. God was powerful and faithful to keep His promise to David, and God is powerful and faithful to accomplish all His purposes and plans for His people. Goliath stood in the way of God's determined plan for David to be the next king, and therefore there was no chance that God would let David lose. The main point of this larger narrative is that God is faithful and powerful to accomplish His promises and plans. So this passage is not meant to be allegorized about us going to kill the giants in our lives. Interpreting the passage before applying the passage can help protect us from making wrong applications.

Homework – Establish Interpretive Principles:

Hopefully at this point you have picked a passage and identified the interpretative challenges of the passage. Now, you should establish the principles of interpretation for your passage. What is the author intending to communicate in your passage? Identify the main point of your passage. What is the context of your passage? Read the immediate context and the book context. What is the normal reading of your passage? Let the passage says what it says without allegorizing or spiritualizing it. What other passages of Scripture are relevant to this passage of Scripture? Create a list of relevant cross-references that are worth studying in their individual contexts. What is the interpretation of your passage? Identify what your passage means in a concise sentence. What are appropriate applications? Don't go too far into application yet, but create a list of someone of applications you may have heard from your passage and be prepared to evaluate them later. These principles will lay the foundation for some of our deeper study later in the class, and you can adjust some of your conclusions as you study the passage more.

Conclusion:

There are principles of interpretation that we can apply to every passage of Scripture. Following these principles help protect us from frequent misinterpretation of Scripture. The Bible does not mean whatever we want it to mean. Our responsibility as students of God's Word is to understand and faithfully communicate what God has revealed through the biblical authors.