

Series: *What Does It Mean to be a Scripture-Driven Church?*

Title: "Keys to Proper Interpretation"

Speaker: Rev. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 3/1/2009

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A third implication of First Corinthians chapter two is the fact that we must take the Bible literally. What do we mean by that? It means that we can only truly and accurately understand the meaning of the words of a book, any book, if we understand what the author intended when he wrote the book. That is true of any human novel or textbook or history book. And it is just as true of the only supernatural book, the Bible. We can only truly and accurately understand the meaning of the words of the Bible, if we understand what the Author, the Holy Spirit, intended to say when He gave the Book to us through holy men of God.

The words of Scripture have one and only one meaning in context – God the Holy Spirit’s meaning. How do you determine God’s meaning? That meaning is always a meaning in context. You begin with the immediate context of the surrounding verses of the passage you are reading. Then you expand out to the larger context of the book of the Bible you are considering. And you also need to take into account the full context of the entire Word of God. God the Holy Spirit never contradicts Himself in Scripture. You can’t look at one part of the Bible in a vacuum, and build a doctrine that contradicts the rest of the Bible. You must consider the Bible as a whole. And you must always remember the nature of the Author of the Book. The Holy Spirit never says anything that is in any way out of keeping with His holiness and the other divine attributes.

Earlier in this series we gave an example of Scripture taken out of context, and that was in Second Peter chapter one. The Roman Catholic church, and many cults, take verse 20 by itself – “No prophecy of the Scripture is of any private interpretation.”

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And they stop there. They use that verse, out of context, to build a false doctrine that says you cannot look at the Bible and interpret it for yourself. You have to have some church authority interpret the Bible for you. And as we saw, they get that false doctrine by divorcing verse 20 from verse 21. They ignore the fact that the two verses are connected by that little word "for". And that's all it takes – by ignoring one little word, you can lift a verse of Scripture out of context, build a false doctrine, and lead thousands and even millions of people astray. We need to be so careful.

Another example of lifting Scripture out of context is the way that some people treat the Sermon on the Mount, in the Gospel of Matthew. When many people think of the Sermon on the Mount, they think of the Beatitudes at the beginning of Matthew chapter 5 – "Blessed are the poor in spirit" – "Blessed are those who mourn" – "Blessed are the meek" – and so on. But many people do not realize that the Sermon on the Mount that begins with the Beatitudes in Matthew chapter 5 and verse 1, extends all the way to the end of Matthew chapter 7. The Sermon on the Mount is over 2500 words long in our English Bibles.

Many people say, "My religion is the Sermon on the Mount." And by that they usually really mean, "My religion is a religion of doing the best I can," or "My religion is living according to the principles of meekness, and mercy, and peacemaking, and so on, that Jesus set forth." And often, when you ask a person who says, "My religion is the Sermon on the Mount" the question, "Well, what does the Sermon on the Mount say?" – they can't tell you. They don't really know it.

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But what does the Sermon on the Mount actually say? Well, here are a few quotations of Jesus actual words:

Matthew 5 verse 21: "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.' But I say to you that whoever is [merely] angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment."

Verse 27: "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

Verse 31: "Furthermore it has been said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery."

Verse 33: "Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform your oaths to the Lord.' But I say to you, do not swear at all. . . . But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.' For whatever is more than these is from the evil one."

What is Jesus' point? His point is in Matthew 5 beginning at verse 17: "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, [the tiniest part of

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the law will not pass until] all is fulfilled." Jesus is telling the people, "Law-keeping is not a mere matter of externals. Law-keeping is a matter of the condition of your heart. And the condition of the human heart is such that you cannot possibly do enough good in order to save yourself. If you fail in the least little fragment of the law, you have broken the whole law. You cannot keep the Law."

And as we go beyond the Sermon on the Mount to the context of the whole Gospel of Matthew, and then outward into the entire context of the Word of God, we see this same theme repeated again, and again, and again: Doing your best is not good enough. Not nearly. All the righteousness you could ever claim to have is as filthy rags in the sight of God. You need someone to stand in your place who has kept the Law perfectly. And that only One is the Lord Jesus Christ. You are a hopeless sinner, and only Christ can redeem you from your sins.

But if we fail to consider the Beatitudes in context, if we fail to consider them in the context of the entire Sermon on the Mount, and if we fail to consider the Sermon on the Mount within the framework of the entire context of the Word of God, we will miss the point. We will embrace a false gospel. We will remain dead in trespasses and sins. Context is absolutely vital in the interpretation of the Word of God.

A fourth implication of First Corinthians chapter two is the fact that the Bible is the Word of God. And you say, "Well, I knew that. Isn't that the whole point?" Well, let me say it a different way. The Bible does not become the Word of God if you feel like it – if you feel that it speaks to you, if you are of the opinion that it has

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something to say to you. That is the doctrine of the liberals. It is also, sad to say, the doctrine of more and more evangelicals today. But that is not what Scripture says. And that is not how the inspired writer of one part of Scripture treats the rest of Scripture. This is the Word of God. It does not become the Word of God when we feel like it.

But sometimes we approach it that way without really thinking about it. I've been in some group Bible studies, and perhaps you have too, where the leader read a passage of Scripture and then went around the room and asked everyone, "What does this passage mean to you?" And often there were as many answers as there were people in the room. Some people would understand the true meaning of the passage. But others would not. And often the group would be led off the track by someone's untested opinion. But that is where the group would start – with everybody's own opinion.

That is not where we are to start. That is not the path of sound doctrine. The first question we must ask, always, is this: "What does this passage mean?" – Period. Not, "What does this passage mean to me?" No. "What does this passage mean?" In other words, what did God the Holy Spirit mean, what did He intend to communicate, when He inspired the words? It is only when we understand what God means that we really understand any passage of Scripture. And that is not something that comes out of human reasoning – it is not, "What this passage means to me." Your faith, Paul says in First Corinthians chapter 2 verse 5, is not to be in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God. In other words, this is an understanding that comes through the

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illumination of the Scriptures by God the Holy Spirit. Enlightenment does not come from the sinful heart of man. It comes from the Divine Author Himself.

And when we have that gracious enlightenment – then and only then – can we go on to the questions that follow, to the matter of application. Too often we start there, rather than ending up there. As we look at any passage of Scripture, we need to think like this: Let's understand what God meant by these words. And once we understand what God meant by these words of Scripture, now let's take up the questions that follow. First, "How did these words apply to the people to whom they were written, in their time and in their circumstances?" And secondly, "How do these words apply to us today, as individual Christians and as the Body of Christ?"

That's a wonderful thing about the Word of God. It is timeless, because the Author is timeless. God spoke the words that are before us today, through the Apostle Paul, to the church at Corinth, nearly two thousand years ago. And He speaks through the pages of Scripture to the local church by the illumination of the Holy Spirit, this very day. And He speaks with the same words and the same meaning today as two thousands years ago.

Our circumstances are different. The circumstances of the church in the 21st century are different from the church in the first century. The circumstances of the local church on one side of town are different from the circumstances of the local church on the other side of town. The circumstances of the church in the United States are different from the circumstances of the church in China, or Nigeria, or

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Brazil. But God the Holy Spirit speaks with the same words and the same meaning to the church on Main Street as He does to the church on Market Street. God the Holy Spirit speaks with the same words and the same meaning to the church in Dayton, Ohio as He does to the church in Denver, Colorado. He speaks with the same words and the same meaning to church in South Carolina as He does to the church in South Korea.

And God the Holy Spirit works in a marvelous, supernatural way to apply the words of this supernatural Book to each church as a body of believers, and to each church member individually. He applies them in your own circumstances. He applies them to your own problems and difficulties. But the message, the meaning, has not changed at all. It is the job of preacher to proclaim God's Word as it is. And the preacher can give general application of the Word, knowing some things about the situation of his hearers. But it is the Spirit of God who knows both the deep things of God, and the deep things of each human heart. Every thought. Every motive. Every circumstance. And as the Word of God is read in the privacy of your own home or preached from the pulpit, the Spirit of God marvelously applies His Word to each need. That is God's ordained method.

A fifth implication of our passage is that every word of the Bible has meaning in context. In fact, the proper interpretation of Scripture can hinge on the meaning of a single word. There are many examples of this. One of them is in the Gospel accounts, in Matthew 22 and in Mark 12, where we read that the Sadducees, who did not believe in the resurrection of the dead, came to Jesus. They tried to trick Him into

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proving that they were right in their unbelief. But Jesus said, No – you are wrong, because you don't understand the Scriptures. You are natural men. Haven't you read, in your own Scriptures, how the Lord said to Moses "I am the God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob"? "I am their God." Present tense. Not, "I was their God" but "I am their God." And that means, Sadducees that the patriarchs are alive today. God is not the God of the dead, but of the living. And that means, Sadducees, that there is a resurrection of the dead. So here, we have one of the great doctrines of Scripture – the doctrine of the resurrection – hinging on the meaning of a single word. It shows us that we need to be very careful how we handle this Book. Every little word has meaning.

Well, those are some of the implications of our passage for the Scripture-driven church. I'd like to round out our consideration of Second Corinthians chapter two by moving from principles and implication to application. I want to mention three specific applications of the principles we've been considering.

And the first one is this: We must understand how God guides the individual Christian and the church as a body. There are three principles of God's guidance that we must always keep in mind.

Principle Number One is this: God guides through Scripture. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 – "All Scripture is God-breathed, is profitable for doctrine (showing us the right path), for reproof (showing us when we've gotten off the right path), for correction (getting

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us back on the right path), and for instruction in righteousness (keeping us on the right path)." God guides through Scripture. That's the fourfold use of Scripture.

Principle Number Two of God's guidance is this: God also guides through circumstances. We live in a real world where God's providence is continually in operation. God sent Joseph as a slave into Egypt ahead of his brethren so that the nation of Israel might be saved from dying out through famine. God put Paul and Silas in jail at Philippi so that the jailer and his household might be converted. And likewise, God in His providence orders and directs the manifold circumstances of your own life for His glory.

But there is a third principle we must always keep in mind. Principle Number Three of God's guidance is this: God's guidance through circumstances never contradicts Scripture. I've heard people say, "Well, Scripture is one thing. But I live in the real world. I have to be practical." What they're really saying is, "I know what the Bible says, but because of this particular situation that I'm in, I need to ignore it, or bend it, or twist it a little bit." Individuals do that, and churches do that.

Dear friends, if we see our circumstances as dictating that we need to do something that is contrary to Scripture, then we are looking at the circumstances in the wrong way. We are letting circumstances become our authority. No – Scripture governs circumstances, not the other way around. Hebrews 4:12 tells us that it is Scripture that is the discerner, or the critic, of the thoughts and intents of the heart. Scripture must govern our comprehension of the circumstances that God sets before

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us. Circumstances are never an excuse to ignore Scripture. Circumstances are never an excuse to compromise the Scriptural way of conducting our lives as individuals, or as a church.

Our second point of application has to do with the fact that we must always consider the Bible as a whole. We have already talked about this, but I want to emphasize it again, in a practical way.

Skepticism, cults, and heresies – they all usually spring from a common root cause: Failure to consider the Bible as a whole. Focusing on certain passages. Divorcing them from the rest of Scripture. Failure to consider the Bible as a whole, failure to consider everything that we read in this Book as part of the great panorama of God's revealed truth – that kind of failure can get us into all kinds of trouble.

Therefore – Don't dwell on pet passages. Don't dwell on problem passages. Take the wide view that this is God's Book, and that it is one Book, and that you need all of it. You can't have just the parts of the Bible that you like, and leave the rest alone. You must take the whole Book as God's Word.

Understand, always, that the more clear in the Bible interprets the less clear, not the other way around. Getting that backwards – forcing a wrong interpretation of some isolated passage on the rest of Scripture – that is how most cults have started. And that is how most heresies get started. And that is how Christians can get off the track in their personal lives.

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Always take the view that if you have a problem with what the Bible says at some particular point, the problem is with you, not with the Book. And be willing to admit that to the Lord. And the Lord will be gracious to help you with that problem of understanding. David says this in Psalm 18, verses 28 to 30 – “For You will light my lamp; the Lord my God will enlighten my darkness. For by You I can run against a troop, by my God I can leap over a wall. As for God, His way is perfect; the word of the Lord is proven; He is a shield to all who trust in Him.” Trust the Lord to enlighten you, to work out the difficulties for you, to help you leap those walls of misunderstanding and difficulty. And He will. Over time, He will clear away the problems and the difficulties. Remember that the Author of this Book, God the Holy Spirit, lives in you, if you are a believer in Jesus Christ today. And the Holy Spirit is indeed your Helper, your Comforter.