

“How to Read the Bible For All It’s Worth: We All Interpret”  
Matthew 5:27-30; 18:6-9

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Scripture: Matthew 5:27-30; 18:6-9

Sermon:

**Introduction...**

Everybody hold up your hands for me. Now check your neighbour- do they have 2 feet? Anybody here missing an eye? I don’t think so!

Have you ever heard anybody say something to the effect of, “I don’t interpret the Bible! I just read it and do what it says!”? Consider that statement and then read with me out Scripture texts.

**Text**

Matthew 5:27-30; 18:6-9

**Series Goals**

We are starting a new series today, “How to Read the Bible for All It’s Worth,” based on a book with the same title. If you’ve been around in the past month you’ve heard about this and you know that not only will I be preaching on this in the morning but we are also gathering together on Sunday evenings to go deeper into this series with some learning time, Q&A, group discussion and case studies.

But as we begin this series, I want to lay out our goals and some guiding principles for our upcoming discussions. Please pull out the insert in your program that is printed on cardstock. On one side you will see “Goals” and on the other side it says, “keep in mind” and has 3 big circles. Turn to the side that has the goals.

Our first goal for this series is to equip each and every one of **us to read and understand the Bible well**. Regardless of anything else you learn in this series, we want you to be better equipped to understand God’s word because we believe it is God’s word for us. It is the sole authority of faith and practice. We need to be able to read it and understand it well.

Our second goal is to help each of us **understand why different interpretations and views of the Bible exist**, even among “Bible believing” Christians. If the Bible is God’s word for his people, why don’t we agree on what it says and means? This is part of the complexity we are going to explore, but for now, realize that when you meet Christians who disagree with you on a theological point, or on how to understand what the Bible teaches, it is not because they don’t believe the Bible and you do! It is not because they don’t uphold the authority of Scripture. It is because they have a different understanding of what certain parts of it mean.

Now, given that different Christians don’t all agree on what particular texts mean, our third goal is to equip people **to evaluate various interpretations of the Bible and appreciate that those with whom we disagree** are actually trying to obey the Bible too. Christians are to love one another and not to be divided. That doesn’t mean we all have to agree! It means that within our disagreements we need to disagree well, respecting others and not concluding that they don’t love God as much as we do because we disagree. We need to not let our diversity of opinions become a source of division.

Finally, though, we do recognize that there are some supposedly Biblical interpretations that are not, in fact, Biblical. They fall outside the boundaries of Christian faith or “orthodoxy” which means correct belief. **We want to equip people to identify those views of the Bible that fall outside the bounds of correct belief**. Another way to say this is that there are some beliefs that are heretical even if they are supposedly based on scripture. For instance, “snake handlers” in some parts of the States, or the JW’s denial of the deity of Christ or the Mormon practice of baptising on behalf of the dead (for which they cite 1 Corinthians 15:29).

So these are the goals we have for this series: to equip people to read their Bibles well, evaluating different viewpoints on Scripture, appreciating those that are within reason or orthodoxy even if you don’t agree with them, but rejecting those that are heretical. No small task!

Within this entire discussion, though, we also want to hold something else close to our hearts. That is the belief that the criteria for salvation is NOT a full and perfect understanding of Scripture! It is not a matter of salvation to understand every passage or agree on every passage. **The sole criterion for salvation is faith in Jesus Christ!**

What does this mean? It means that maybe our views of Scripture, or specific passages, will be challenged. Maybe we learn something and are faced with changing what we think and believe. This is not a matter of salvation! Put your faith in Christ, not your understanding of particular passages! If you are holding on to a particular interpretation of Scripture to the point that changing that view shakes your faith, then you are putting your faith in your own understanding of Scripture and not in Jesus.

This brings us to the other side of the handout for the series. Flip the sheet over and you will see **3 large circles each with a letter, F, D, or P**. This is a helpful tool for keeping track of what are the most important things in Christian belief.

The F stands for “fundamentals” (or “foundations” if the word fundamental has a negative connotation for you). Fundamentals are those core doctrines that all Christians hold to. These are the foundations of the Christian faith and changing these would mean radically altering Christian belief. For instance, fundamentals would include the Trinity, the deity of Christ, the Atonement, the importance of the Bible, that the Bible is inspired in some way, baptism and communion.

The D stand for “distinctives.” Distinctives are things that different groups of Christians believe that not all Christians believe and these make these groups distinct. For instance, one Baptist distinctive is believers’ baptism rather than infant baptism. Another distinctive would be the way baptism is done, whether through sprinkling, pouring or full dunking. Styles of church government, whether each congregation is independent or if there are regional authorities that make decisions for all churches is another distinctive. The exact meaning and also method of communion would be another distinctive. All Christians believe in the Atonement of Christ on the cross, but different Christians hold distinct understandings of exactly how the Atonement works. Calvinism and Arminianism are also distinctives within the bounds of Christian orthodoxy.

The P stands for “preferences.” Preferences are things that are not central to Christian belief or practice. Style of music, whether or not to use instruments, style of dress (casual or formal) would all be preferences. Whether to have communion monthly, quarterly or weekly would be another preference. Translation of the Bible to use is a preference.

Throughout church history, too often people fight over preferences as if they were fundamentals! Too often Christians fight over distinctives as if they were fundatmentals! As a result, congregations and denominations split. The church’s witness is damaged. Relationships are ruptured.

Also, as a result of so much fighting in the past over things that were not central, sometimes Christians then abandon fundamentals in order to “keep the peace.” I see this happening in some liberal churches where, in the name of unity or inclusivity, things like the deity of Christ are being abandoned. Sometimes people fight over distinctives and preferences because they are worried about the so called “slippery slope” that if they don’t fight tooth and nail over everything, they will abandon fundamentals.

It is important to always keep in mind whether a given issue is a fundatmental, a distinctive or a preference. This needs to guide how we handle disagreements with other believers. We can hold our preferences and distinctives tightly and with passion! But that does not mean those who disagree with us are heretics. It does not mean we should break fellowship or have nothing to do with those who hold different views on these topics. If our disagreement is over a preference, then allow them to have their preference. If a disagreement is over a distinctive, respect their different stance on the topic and move on. It’s ok to discuss these things, but not to tear one another down over them. Only when an issue is a fundamental are we to take a hard stance on it. Only when an issue is central to the Christian faith should we not give the other person “room” to disagree, but instead we need to seek how to correct them gently but firmly.

### ***Good Interpretation***

Ok, so if these are the guidelines and goals for this series, what is the series actually about? The series is about good interpretation. Why? Because there are a lot of bad interpretations out there! And I don’t mean that those who hold different distinctives are “bad” interpretations. I means actual bad interpretations, like baptizing on behalf of the dead, snake handling and the like.

Another example of bad interpretation comes from those outside the faith who are antagonistic to it. For instance, many atheists deliberately put forth bad interpretations in an attempt to discredit Christianity. Over the past few years I’ve come across people talking about “Zombie Jesus Day” around Easter. They equate the

Resurrection with zombies! This is an incredibly bad interpretation of Scripture and the resurrection! But interestingly it is getting some traction. I know that even on the show *The Walking Dead*, a show about zombies, there are references to Jesus' startling words in John 6 about eating his flesh and drinking his blood. You may think this is outlandish and silly, but the early Christians often had to refute charges of cannibalism! The vocabulary around communion of eating Christ's body and drinking his blood was confused for actual cannibalism! So this bad interpretation is not new.

What, then, makes for good interpretation? There are two tools needed for good interpretation: **exegesis and hermeneutics**. These are too big words that I will explain. Exegesis means getting at the author's intended meaning. Exegesis means to draw out the meaning of the text. Think of "ex" like "exit." It means to draw out the author's meaning when he or she wrote the text. It doesn't just have to be about the Bible, but about any text. Most often, though, it is used in discussions about the Bible.

Hermeneutics is another difficult word to say or spell but it doesn't have too complex a meaning. Hermeneutics means to apply something today. The term can also be used more broadly about how to approach any written document, but for the sake of our series we will use a more narrow understanding of the word.

**Exegesis draws out the meaning of the text. Hermeneutics applies that meaning to the here and now.** Another way to put this is that exegesis asks the question, "What was God saying to them?" Hermeneutics asks, "What is God saying to me (or us) now?"

So these are the two tools we are going to develop over the next two months: exegesis and hermeneutics. Exegesis can be broken down into two categories, both having to do with "context." **Good exegesis takes into account the historical or cultural context of a passage as well as the literary context of the passage.** This means considering what the historical particularities of a passage may be. Many of us already do this in a casual way. Have you ever heard somebody say, "Back in those days..." Or "What Jesus really meant was...."? These are examples of taking into account the cultural or historical context in which the text was written.

Similarly, when we take into account whether a passage is poetry, like a Psalm, or narrative, like the book of Acts or the Gospels, or a letter, like Romans we are taking into account the literary context of the passage. Rarely do we read the census information of the book of Numbers the same way as we read the birth narratives of Jesus!

Here's the thing, though: usually we just use these tools when a passage is difficult or confusing for us. The key to good interpretation, though, is to use these tools every time! We must always be asking, "What did they do back then? What did this person really mean? What kind of writing is this?" etc. Too often people pick and choose when they use these tools, they use them inconsistently, and this leads to bad interpretation and bad application.

This is the key to good exegesis. Good exegesis is necessary for good hermeneutics. That is, **we must properly understand what the author was saying back then to know how it applies to us today.** Our hermeneutics, our application of God's word today, must always be governed by what God was saying to the original recipients of the text. We cannot use a text to make God say to us today what God never said in the first place. Otherwise we can make the Bible say whatever we please and we then give the Holy Spirit credit for saying it! We give our own ideas divine authority, which is actually sinful. It means putting ourselves in the place of God!

If you think about it, this was actually the reason for the Fall in the Garden of Eden! The serpent came to Eve and said, "Did God really say....?" Asking about the fruit of the tree of knowledge about good and evil. Eve's response actually added to God's word! Go look it up after the service. Eve said God told them not only to not eat the fruit but not even to touch it. She added her own piece to what God actually said. She put herself in the position of speaking for God, of making herself to be "like God" and that was the beginning of the Fall of humanity into sin.

### **Case Study**

We've talked a lot about theory and tools. Let's actually do it. Let's apply some tools of exegesis to our two passages in Matthew that we read before. Then, given our understanding of the original meaning, let's apply it for today. Hopefully as we go you will see that this is something I try to model each and every week. However, with this series, we are going to be explicit about what we are doing, why and how.

Consider Matthew 5:27-30. To get at the original meaning of the text, we will ask ourselves the 5 W's. That is, we will ask ourselves "who, what, why, when, where?" The who question actually needs to be asked 3 or 4 times. **Who is writing? Who is he writing to? Who is speaking in the passage? Who is he speaking to?**

In this case, we have Matthew writing. He is the author and narrator of the passage. He is one of the 12 Apostles, a Jew, who knew Jesus personally. Who is he writing to? Matthew is writing to a Jewish audience. That is not something explicitly written in the text, but when compared to the other Gospels, Matthew's Gospel has a profoundly Jewish flavour. He includes a lot of Jewish cultural references that would be lost on non-Jews.

Who is speaking in this passage? It is Jesus. Who is he speaking to? To figure this out, you need to look at what comes before these verses. This is, in part, the literary context of the passage. This passage is part of the Sermon on the Mount. That means he is speaking to the crowds that have gathered to hear him speak in Galilee. The people had gathered from all over the region, but they were predominantly Jewish listeners. This is the "Who?" It also answers the "Where?"

When was this passage written? The Gospel of Matthew was (obviously) written after the death and resurrection of Jesus. The events in the passage, however, took place early in Jesus' ministry, before his death and resurrection.

Why were these words recorded? Why were they spoken in the first place? Matthew recorded these words as part of Jesus' teaching. The whole Sermon on the Mount is an important passage that shows us much of what Jesus taught and gives us insight into what it means to live as a Christian. They also give us some insight into how Jesus saw himself and how people reacted to him. This is why Matthew recorded them.

Now let's consider the "what" of Jesus' statements. He has a series of statements in the Sermon on the Mount that begin with something along the lines of, "You have heard it is said.... But I say...." A number of these are actually expansions on the 10 Commandments! Our passage itself begins, "You have heard that it is said, 'Do not commit adultery.'" That is one of the 10.

Then Jesus says, "But I say...." This is actually quite remarkable! You see the prophets in the Old Testament never said, "I say..." They always said, "The LORD says...." [Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew Vol 1*, p. 183] The 10 Commandments may have been written down by Moses, but it was God who said them. When Rabbis taught something they would always reference other, older Rabbis too. Never would they say, "I say...." They never presumed to have direct authority to comment on God's law. So it would have been shocking to Jesus' original hearers to hear him say, "But I say...." especially when speaking of God's law, not just the teaching of another Rabbi! **Jesus is claiming to have the same authority as God.**

Jesus then goes on to expand on that commandment. He says that it is not enough just to refrain from the actual act of adultery. Rather, if one even looks at a woman lustfully that he has committed adultery in his heart! **Jesus moves the location of the sin from the outward act to the inner desire.** This is a radical shift! Adultery is no longer just about what you do, but about what you desire, what you think about, what you imagine!

He says that anyone who looks at a woman "lustfully" has already committed adultery in his heart. The word "lustfully" doesn't mean merely admiring a person as beautiful or handsome. The connotation of the word is to desire to have that person, to possess that person. [Bruner, p. 183] To let your thoughts go beyond mere admiration to sexual desire, to wanting that person sexually, is where the sin lies, not just carrying through on those desires.

Jesus then says that if your eye or hand causes you to sin, gouge it out or cut it off! The word for "causes you to sin" is the Greek word "skandalon." We've looked at this word a long time ago. Literally it means the bait in a trap. Sometimes it is translated "stumbling block." If your eye or hand is a stumbling block, if it causes you to take the bait in a trap, to become ensnared in sin, then cut it off! It is better to lose an eye or a hand than to go to hell.

Wow! That's pretty dramatic! Consider, too, that Jesus was talking to Jews. If a Jew was mutilated in such a way, according to Leviticus 21:17, he would not be allowed into the temple anymore! Jesus was actually suggesting that people make themselves unable to worship God in the temple if it meant escaping the trap of lust.

Some of Jesus' listeners were Pharisees. They prided themselves on keeping every aspect of the literal word of the law. Jesus was suggesting that they cut parts of themselves off, disqualifying them from temple activities, instead of lusting in their hearts after women! Wow!

Matthew's original audience would have understood this too. As Jews, they would have been shocked at Jesus words. They would have realized what Jesus was suggesting, not only in terms of being maimed, but in terms of the religious consequences of entering the temple.

Was Jesus really advocating cutting off limbs? No. **Jesus was using exaggeration for effect. He wanted to startle or shock his listeners so they would get his point.** Sin is a serious problem and it's not limited to what you do. Sin includes your thought life, your desires and imagination. The laws in the OT were focussed on the outward actions and physical appearance of a person. The laws about unclean and clean were an external reminder of inward sin. But by Jesus' day, the religious people had become focused only on the outward or external aspects of sin and holiness. Jesus was bringing them back to the truth that our sinfulness is not just an exterior problem but an inner problem as well. The shock of cutting off the external parts of the body involved in sin, which would make one unclean and unable to enter the temple, pushed home the point that sin is also an internal problem. One can be outwardly unclean- having cut off a hand or gouged out an eye- and still go to heaven. Conversely, one can be outwardly whole, but still go to hell!

This is what Jesus' words meant to his original audience. This is what Matthew's words, recording Jesus' words, originally meant to his hearers too. So this is where we have to begin when we try to figure out what the words mean for us today.

So how do we apply this? How do we bring forward to our day the teaching of Jesus in his day? We've done some solid exegesis. How it's time for hermeneutics.

Sin is a serious problem. We need to make major sacrifices and take drastic action to deal with the sin in our lives. And **we must remember sin is not limited to bad acts. Sin is also a matter of our thoughts, will, desires and imagination.**

Even today, we get caught up thinking we're "ok" if we are not committing overtly bad acts. We think we are "good Christians" because we refrain from committing sexual sins, or adultery, or other sinful actions. But we may not be taking into consideration our thought life! We may be lusting after people, or after power, or after wealth. Sin is a matter of the heart, not just outward activities.

This applies to sexual conduct today. Many Christians struggle with sexual purity. Our culture doesn't help either! Many Christian young people struggle with the letter of the law vs the spirit of the law. They think as long as they don't go "all the way" they're not committing sin. But Jesus moves the location of the sin here from the outward act to the inner thoughts and desires. If we are living for Christ, we must be ruthless in rooting out the sin that dwells in our hearts! That is, in our thoughts, desires, will, feelings and imagination! Sexual purity is not just about what you "do" it's about what you fantasize about, what you dream of, what you think about too.

Jesus' words in our passage were specifically about adultery. But if you read the entire section, beginning back at v. 17 and reading through to the end of the chapter, there is a repeated theme that our sinfulness is not just about actions, but about our desires and intentions too.

How much do we do in our own lives to safeguard our desires? How ruthless are we with our imaginations? Are we willing to cut things out of our lives or take drastic measures against those things that ensnare us in sin? This is the question our text poses before us today! And Jesus doesn't just say it once. In Matthew 18, which we read but did not study closely, the same principle is at work. We are to be ruthless with the sources of sin in our lives, the things that ensnare us or others in sin. We are to cut them off!

It is easy to get tricked into going to church, behaving oneself and thinking everything is fine. That is the modern equivalent of the trap the Pharisees fell into. But Jesus radically alters our thinking about sin. He moves the problem of sin from the actions to the heart. And he tells us that we are responsible for doing whatever is necessary to root out sin! We are responsible to do whatever is in our power to battle that sin dwelling in our hearts. It's not enough to count on our outward behaviour to restore our relationship with God.

### **Conclusion**

This is the method we must always use when studying Scripture. We began by asking the "who, what, why, when and where" questions. This was to get at the original meaning of the text. I sprinkled in a few things from commentaries, from Bible scholars, but most of what we saw we could come up with if we read the whole of Chapter 5 or the whole of Matthew. We don't always have to consult the scholars to good work drawing out the

meaning of the text!

Once we discovered the original meaning, it was not a huge leap to apply the text to our own situation. But we have to get at the original meaning of the text first. Obviously, a wooden reading of the text is inappropriate. Christians are not known for self-mutilation. We are not lopping off limbs on a regular basis! Using common sense, we know that Jesus was exaggerating for effect. But this does illustrate the fact that we do all interpret the text! We don't just read it woodenly and obey it without thinking!

This is a text where it's easy to see that we need to think and not just take a wooden reading. But there are many other passages that are not as obvious. There are many other passages that are taken at face value, that people read woodenly, and then try to apply it today. One of the points of this series, and a point Fee and Stuart make in the first chapter, is that we must not reserve using our interpretive tools for those passages that are difficult. **We need to do good exegesis and hermeneutics every time we study the Bible, on every passage, including the "easy" ones or the "clear" ones.** Otherwise, we may be ascribing to God our message instead of the message he gave. We may be reading into Scripture what we want it to say and be giving the Holy Spirit "credit" for the message. When we do that, we give our own interpretations divine authority!

Moving ahead in the series, we will be looking at a variety of examples of how to read Scripture and how to apply our exegetical tools. The series is broken down by different kind of writing in the Bible, like narrative, poetry, wisdom literature, epistles (or letters) etc. For each session, whether Sunday morning or evening, we will talk about techniques for drawing out the meaning of the text and then applying the message to today. We will examine specific passages and show how the tools are to be used.

I hope you will join us in the evenings and make church a priority on Sunday mornings. The Bible is God's word for us and learning how to read it will be vitally important if we want to grow in our understanding of God. Amen.