

Exegesis: Understanding How to Study God's Word.

Class 1

1. Exegesis: a fancy word for bible study, a systematic method to help better understand the meaning of God's Word before it can be applied to our lives.
2. Why is good exegesis important?
 - a. If we believe that the Bible is the infallible, inspired Word of God, we should treat it as the most important information in the universe—because it is.
 - i. We might not interpret the meaning correctly, but that does not mean that God's Word is wrong. It means we are.
 - b. 2 Tim 2:15 commands that we rightly handle the word of truth (God's Word).
 - c. Peter says that although the Scriptures can be hard to understand, "the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction" (2 Pet 3:16).
 - d. Misunderstanding God's Word is damaging to our faith, relationships with others, and relationship with God.
3. Requirements for good exegesis:
 - a. Dependence upon the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 2:14-16).
 - b. Passion for God's Word (Psalms 119:33-35).
 - c. Desire to investigate the scriptures, even daily (Acts 17:11-12).
 - d. Ability to make direct application (James 1:23-25).
4. God's meaning vs. man's meaning:
 - a. A common interpretative practice gaining popularity is called *deconstruction* or the *reader-response method*. This idea says that the reader, not the writer, puts the meaning in the text. "What does it mean *to me*?" is how deconstruction approaches the Bible rather than, "What does God say?" God's Word is not only true, it is absolute truth; however, this method attempts to make truth relative to each individual reader instead of the Church throughout all time. Meaning never changes, application may.
 - b. Sifting through the Bible for passages that prove an agenda instead of sharing or understanding God's meaning usually takes the meaning out of context and is not how God's people should use God's Word. Instead, it is trying to control the passage for one's own selfish purposes.

5. Understanding your Bible and biblical translation¹:

- a. Looking at a different language structure that is nearly 2,000 years old requires a strong understanding of the original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. Because we do not have years of expertise in these languages, we must trust the translators who provide us with the text in English. However, understanding how translation works helps us get a better grasp of the text. Translators must make many decisions as they translate:
 - i. Translators must understand their audience. Is the translation for adults or kids? What is the audience's education level? Are the readers believers or non-believers? Why does this matter? Because it effects word choices. For example:
 1. Word Choice: In 1 John 2:2, different translations use the words, 'expiation' (RSV), 'propitiation' (ESV), and 'atoning sacrifice' all for the same Greek word. This is in an effort to make a Greek word with an understandable meaning have an understandable meaning in the English. Another example is found in Luke 2:7. What are 'swaddling cloths'? Other translations attempt to select words that convey a meaning that might be more understood. How about the word 'hallowed' that appears many times in the KJV? Is there a better word choice for today? Many translations use the word 'holy' (except in the Lord's prayer).
 2. Grade Level. While closely related to word choice, grade level must be addressed. If the audience is children or the translation is looking for an easier text, a lower grade level must be sought. Long sentences (such as Ephesians 1:3-14) must be broke up into many shorter ones. Specific words must be selected over others. KJV is written at a 12th grade level; NIV is about 9th grade; and the Nlrv is written at the 3rd grade level.
 3. Word for Word vs. Meaning for Meaning:
 - a. The fancy names for this are 'Formal Equivalence' (word for word) and 'Dynamic Equivalence' (meaning for meaning or phrase for phrase). (There is also a name for translations like The Message or children's Bibles called 'commentary.')
 - b. Word for word. The closest thing to a word for word translation is an interlinear Bible. These are good for word studies but not at all easy to read. Bibles like the ESV and KJV attempt to remain as close to word for word as is possible but because of context, sentence construction, and word meanings that are difficult to translate from one language to another, an exact word for word is not practical. In addition, word choices must still be made, even in an interlinear Bible. For example, the same Greek word found in 1 Corinthians 6:9 is translated 'sexual perverts' (RSV), 'male prostitutes' (NIV),

¹ The following information comes from William D. Mounce, *Greek for the Rest of Us* (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, Mich, 2003), 19-42.

‘effeminate’ (NASB), and ‘men who practice homosexuality’ (ESV). While this might seem troubling, think about how many meanings there are for the words ‘light’ and ‘dude.’ How does context change the possible meanings of words? And how about the changing nature of words, such as ‘gay.’

- c. Meaning for meaning. This approach is employed in translation to increase understanding. It helps the reader see the context where the Greek or Hebrew grammatical rules may not be as easy for the reader to extract meaning. However, at times the sentence structure in the Greek and Hebrew actually convey meaning through the structure itself and depending on the translator, this meaning might be lost. Also, this type of translation opens the door for a loose translation.
- d. It is recommended that you use both types of translations in conjunction with one another for study—the meaning for meaning may provide shades of meaning that the word for word might not. And for the specific, deeper study down to the single clause or phrase the word for word should be used. Commentary-style Bibles are okay to get a broad idea but should not be used as study Bible.
- e. Translation Chart. This is a loose guide. NIV and RSV are very much word for word but because they adjust gender to the neutral some argue they should be closer to meaning for meaning. Also, there really is no middle Bible and these are placed only in relation to each other.

Interlinear
 [Word for Word]
 NASB
 ESV
 RSV
 KJV
 NKJV
 NRSV
 NIV
 TNIV
 NLT
 NIrV
 GNT
 [Meaning for Meaning]
 Living
 Message

- f. A parallel Bible shows multiple translations side by side and is valuable for study. It is recommended that your parallel Bible contain at least one word for word and one meaning for meaning. (www.bible.org is a good on-line parallel Bible feature.)

4. **Ambiguity.** A translator must decide if ambiguity in the original language will be left ambiguous in the translation. Most translations do not attempt to resolve unclear passages but instead leave determining the meaning to the reader (KJV, NASB, RSV, and ESV). On occasion, the NIV attempts to resolve the ambiguity, for example 2 Corinthians 5:14. On rare occasion, the original might be clear and the translation creates ambiguity.
 5. **Theological Bias.** While also not much of an issue, a theological bias can swing a translational choice one way or the other. The most common is the words ‘young woman’ or ‘virgin’ for the same word. Most Bibles use ‘virgin’ but not all. Romans 9:5 provides another example where bias dictates where punctuation is applied—one calling Jesus God and there other not (NIV vs RSV respectively).
- ii. While the idea that all these translations differ might be daunting, it is important to understand that generally, these translations do not substantially change any of the meaning of the Bible. Use multiple translations for study but find one you like and use it as your primary study Bible. Get familiar with it, because your familiarity will help increase your understanding and benefit your study. Also, do not let anyone try to tell you that these translations decrease the meaning or validity of the Bible’s message—if anything, the hundreds of people on translation teams over the past 200 years demonstrates the opposite.

6. Exegetical Method

a. Choosing a Text.

- i. It is important that you choose a complete thought; often this is a complete paragraph although sometimes, it is an entire narrative (story), or it may be only one sentence. While looking for a complete text, remember that you are not looking for something topical, but a lesson being taught from God’s word.
- ii. Keep your mind open. Be willing to allow the text to teach you, to stretch you. Be aware that other nearby passages may hold some interpretative value on the subject passage whether they initially seem related or not.
- iii. Look for beginnings and ends of complete thoughts.
- iv. Do not depend on the verse numbering or section headings. Remember, these were added much later than when the original manuscripts were written. The verse numbers and headings are not a part of the inspired, infallible Word of God, they are there for our benefit.
- v. Look for paragraphs breaks and understand how the translation deals with them. Where your translation may have separated the text might not be where the older manuscripts broke up the text. Some Bibles have a system to indicate where original paragraphs were. For example, the ESV indents the original breaks by 5 character spaces; the NASB bold faces the verse number or first letter of a new

paragraph. Some older publications actually put a ¶ where the original manuscripts broke up the paragraphs.

- vi. Look for literary clues that might mark a beginning or end of a thought. These often include some kind of introductory statements like letting the reader know the time (“After they had eaten. . .”), place (“When they entered. . .”), or some kind of concluding summary. Look for key words like ‘Now’ or ‘Finally.’ Usually when you find something like ‘therefore’ you are in the middle of the thought. (A word of caution, Paul uses ‘therefore’ often, especially in the book of Romans, so this is not always a good indicator of a complete thought.)
- vii. Look for thematic elements. Sometimes key words will tie a thought together, such as ‘faith’ (Hebrews 11) or ‘abide’ (John 15). Notice the terms, “put off” and “put on” in Colossians 3. These two sections of scripture can be seen as one big thought or two separate thoughts, but clearly, they are thematically related.
- viii. Consider context. How might what comes before and after influence the meaning of the passage?
- ix. Consider the genera of the book from which the passage comes from. Is it narrative, poetry, expository, prophecy, psalm, or a personal letter? Think about how this might play into the size and fullness of a complete idea.

b. Exploring the Text

- i. Pray for the Holy Spirit’s guidance and illumination of specific things that will present meaning from the text.
- ii. Read the passage from a variety of translations and read it many times. Read it slow and fast. Read it aloud at least once, but preferably many times. If you can, listen to the passage being read to you from a friend or audio Bible. Note any shades of meaning the present themselves. Note any differences in translation that seem to present the material in a way that is substantially different. Note different word choices. Note where the passage may be read differently given punctuation or context. Write these things down for later study.
- iii. Write down any questions you have or think of. Don’t worry about answering them at this point. Write down any initial observations, including feelings and logical issues. Think about the passage; *feel* the passage. What is it saying? (Not application in your life but just communicating through all time.) Use your imagination to see if there are any different ways of reading the passage, but don’t get too locked into any one way yet. Write down your findings.
- iv. At this point, do not go to your study guides or commentaries. Let the Spirit and the Word guide and move and guide you.