

Epistles

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Review: Idioms

One thing I didn't mention last time when we covered figures of speech is idioms. An idiom is a euphemism, or some other phrase that the culture has assigned a meaning other than the literal meaning. Like when you tell an actor "Break a leg" or say, "That guy is full of baloney." It's important that we not interpret idiomatic language in a literal way. One example is in

Malachi 1:2 ' "Was not Esau Jacob's brother?" the LORD says. "Yet I have loved Jacob, 3 but Esau I have hated

God loved Jacob and hated Esau.

Luke 14:26 "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters--yes, even his own life--he cannot be my disciple.

So God hated Esau and we are to hate our parents.

Those are idioms. When the Jews said they loved A and hated B that was an idiom meaning they loved A more than they loved B.

Genesis 29:30 Jacob ... loved Rachel more than Leah.

That verse is saying Jacob loved Leah, but he loved Rachel more. So he loved both women, but one more than the other. Now look at the next verse:

Genesis 29:31 When the LORD saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren.

Did Jacob hate her? No – he loved her. But in comparison with Rachel he loved her less, and so the Hebrew idiom says she was “hated” in the sense that she was loved less. “Jacob I have loved but Esau I

have hated” means God loved Jacob more than He loved Esau. And when Jesus said if you don’t hate your father and mother you can’t be His disciple, He was saying you have to love Him more than you love them. In fact, listen to the two different ways Jesus says the same thing:

Luke 14:26 "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters--yes, even his own life--he cannot be my disciple.

Matthew 10:37 "Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me;

Didactic Literature (Epistles)

Literary Context

We have talked a lot about context – the immediate context of the sentence, the near context of the chapter and book, the more remote context of similar passages. But there is one more kind of context we need to consider – literary context (type of literature). Another word for that is genre. You don’t interpret a headline the same as a slogan or lyrics of a song. The same sentence may occur in a personal letter to you and in a history book, and could have very different meaning. It’s the same way in Scripture.

The Bible is not a book; it’s a library of 66 books. Some of those books are history books – giving us a record of what happened. Others are letters, instructing churches on how to behave or what to believe. You don’t interpret the history the same way you interpret the letters. When we read in 1 Thessalonians 5:17 **Pray without ceasing**, we all assume we need to pray without ceasing. But when we read Jesus’ words in Mark 10:21 **sell everything you have and give to the poor** none of us sell everything we have and give to the poor. Those may seem on the surface to be inconsistencies, but they are not. They have to do with genre

Recipients

And in addition to genre, statements are interpreted differently depending upon the recipients and the purpose. When we read the 10 commandments, we come across **Do not commit adultery**, and we all assume we are never permitted to commit adultery under any circumstances. But when we read the one that says not even your animals are permitted to carry a load or allow our animals to do any work on a Saturday, we don’t take that as applying to us. (Even the 7th Day Adventists can be seen carrying things on Saturday.) Why is #7 binding and not #4? When the Bible commands that a disrespectful son be stoned to death, why do we point to that verse to prove that children should respect their parents, but we don’t stone anyone? We interpret different passages differently because they were written to different people for different reasons. Remember, the meaning does not come from the words. Meaning is conveyed by the words, but it comes from the author. The meaning is whatever the author was trying to say to the original readers. And that means in order to properly interpret a passage you have to have an idea who the original readers were, and why this piece of literature was being written to them.

One time I got a long e-mail from my cousin, and, after reading it, noticed he had sent it to other people besides me. When I saw whom he had sent it to, I had to re-read the whole thing. Some things have very different significance if they are said to a close friend, or a large group, or to unbelievers, etc.

1 John 1:1 That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched--this we proclaim concerning the Word of life.

If you read that without knowing whom John was writing to, you don’t think much of it. But when you realize the recipients were being affected by a religion that believed Jesus was not really human, it becomes more meaningful. What John said: They saw and touched Jesus. What John meant: Jesus had a real, physical body

Think of the story of the Prodigal Son. What is the purpose of the parable? If all you do is read the parable, you will tend to either focus on the son or the father. It’s common to think the point is to teach about God’s mercy, God’s forgiveness, or the folly of being like the Prodigal. But if you focus on the

prodigal or the father you will miss the main point Jesus was making. The purpose becomes clear if you just place yourself in the setting in which Jesus told the parable.

Luke 15:1-2 Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering around to hear him. 2 But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

The Scribes and Pharisees are muttering about Jesus hanging around repentant sinners. These people had been rebellious, but now were turning to Christ. They were lost but now were found. And the religious leadership was grumbling about it. And so Jesus tells three stories – the story of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son. And the point in all three is very obvious – the proper response to the lost being found is joy – not grumbling. Jesus is pointing out to these leaders how different they are from God. While He is rejoicing they are grumbling. And then to cap it all off, the third story introduces another character – the older brother (who, frankly, ruins an otherwise wonderful story). And that is Jesus' point. The main character in the prodigal son story is not the prodigal nor the father. It's the older brother who grumbles when his lost brother is restored, and ruins the whole party. That brother represents the Scribes and Pharisees who are ruining God's whole party. So you can see, just like with that e-mail – the way you interpret something is determined largely by who was being addressed and for what purpose.

There are five major kinds of literature in the Bible:

1. Didactic (Direct teaching) That's the easiest to interpret.
 - * Epistles (Romans through Jude)
 - * Jesus' sermons or discourses
 - * Many parts of the Law
 - * Much of Prophecy
2. History (historical narrative)
 - * Old Testament Bible stories
 - * History about Jesus in the Gospels
 - * Acts
3. Prophecy
 - * Visions
 - * Oracles
 - * Apocalyptic
4. Poetry
5. Wisdom
 - * Proverbs
 - * Wisdom Psalms
 - * Ecclesiastes.
 - * Job
 - * Song of Solomon

1. Didactic (Direct teaching)

*** Epistles**

The word "epistle" means "letter." The Epistles (Romans – Jude) are letters written by guys like Paul, Peter or John and addressed to an individual or a church.

"Occasional" Theology

When God decided to teach us theology, He did not choose to do it by giving us a systematic theology. (Ch.1 Doctrine of God in outline form, ch.2 doctrine of Jesus, Spirit, Salvation, etc.) Instead He chose to teach us all that by inspiring letters written to address specific situations. So the theologians say that the theology in the Epistles is "occasional" – not in the sense that it happens from time to time, but in the sense that it is written because of some occasion. For example, the theology in the book of Philemon was written to address a specific occasion (the return of Onesimus to Philemon). The occasion for 1 Corinthians 7 was the questions the Corinthians asked Paul. The occasion for 1 Corinthians 5 was a man in the church living in an incestuous relationship. That's what they mean by "occasional."

So, instead of just giving us a list of all the attributes of Christ, we have one letter written to people who were doubting His deity, another letter written to those doubting His humanity, etc. And as we see the Apostles respond to those specific errors we learn more about theology than if God would have just organized it into a systematic theology book. And part of the genius of that approach is the fact that for each doctrine, we get a clue as to how to apply it in practical life. Instead of giving us a giant systematic theology, God took the doctrines of the Gospel and applied them to real situations in real churches.

It also shows us which things are most important. (In a systematic theology, you may not know that ministry to widows is emphasized more than the doctrine of angels). Which things are emphasized more than other things is hugely important, and almost completely ignored in systematic theology.

So as you read the epistles, realize it's like listening to one side of a phone conversation. Something happened that generated this response and you're just listening in on the response. And the fact that God did it that way – using occasional theology - is part of what makes Scripture so incredibly rich. The same passage can simultaneously teach on multiple topics. If Paul told Philemon to welcome back his runaway slave Onesimus, because Onesimus had become a Christian, what are the implications? One doctrinal implication is that the relationship between brothers in Christ supersedes the slave-master relationship. Another doctrinal implication is that slavery, in and of itself, is not an evil thing. Another doctrinal implication is that we are not to punish one another for sins. The passage can teach us some things about how a good leader can help two brothers who are in a conflict. If God gave us doctrine in encyclopedia form instead through occasional theology, it would be 100 volumes. The material in Philemon would have to appear under at least four different headings. But through occasional theology God has packed huge amounts of teaching in one location.

When Paul tells Timothy to depose the false teachers in Ephesus, one doctrinal implication is that safeguarding the Gospel is more important than avoiding strife in the Church. Another doctrinal implication is that the authority structure in the church is not based strictly on age or seniority alone (since Timothy is younger than the men he is to depose). When Luke says his Gospel is based on careful historical research, one doctrinal implication is that the validity of our faith is rooted in whether or not the events in the Gospels actually happened. And another doctrinal implication is that when God inspired Scripture, He didn't always just dictate words. He sovereignly used the writer's mind and will to bring about the text He desired.

Do you see how efficient that is? Instead of listing out all the doctrines in 500 volumes, God gave us 21 letters that apply those doctrines to specific circumstances. And you might learn 8 or 10 different doctrines that are affirmed by a single passage of Scripture. That's why when you read a systematic theology, the same verse will be used to support something under the doctrine of election in the chapter about salvation, and the doctrine of the deity of Christ in the chapter about Christ, and the doctrine of God's grace in the chapter about God the Father.

So as you study the epistles, always be asking, "If he said that to those people in that circumstance, what are the doctrinal implications?" That's the main key to interpreting the Epistles.

Quotes from the Old Testament

One difficulty in the interpretation of Epistles is in quotations of the Old Testament. Everything in the Bible is Scripture, so why does Scripture quote Scripture? When we quote Scripture we do it to prove the validity of an idea. But if every part of the Bible is equally authoritative, why does the Bible sometimes quote the Bible?

In some cases it is to establish credibility (such as when Jesus was talking to people who didn't believe He was God, but did believe the Old Testament). Other times it might be to demonstrate that an idea is not novel or new (such as when Paul backs up seemingly novel ideas in Romans with numerous quotes from the Old Testament). But other times it's for the purpose of calling to the readers' minds the principles of the passage being quoted. So when you see the Bible quoted in the Epistles, it's very important to look up what that quoted verse is saying in the original context. And when you do that, you will understand the New Testament passage better.

Example:

2 Timothy 2:17-19 Their teaching will spread like gangrene. (we are talking about false teachers) Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, 18 who have wandered away from the truth. They say that the resurrection has already taken place, and they destroy the faith of some. 19 Nevertheless, God's solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: "The Lord knows those who are his," and, "Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness."

What is the point of these quotes? "The Lord knows those who are his" The most common interpretation of that statement is this: "If you are a Christian God knows you in a special way. Therefore you can have a great sense of security." Certainly that is true, but is that what this passage is talking about? If so, it's very hard to follow the flow of thought in the passage, because the context is not talking about security or intimacy with God. Of course the Lord knows who are His – He knows everything! But what does that have to do with Hymenaeus and Philetus? And what about "Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness"? What is the significance of the fact that Paul quoted these passage in the context of talking about a couple false teachers?

Let's take a look at the context of these quotes, and everything will become clear. Both quotes are from Numbers 16 (vv.5,26). Numbers 16 is a very dramatic story of an attempted coup in Israel. In verses 1-2 Korah and 150 men rebelled and **rose up against Moses**. In verse 3 they say: "You think God has set you apart as holy, but we think we are all holy. You are no better than anyone else."

Numbers 16:1 Korah son of Izhar, the son of Kohath, the son of Levi, and certain Reubenites-- Dathan and Abiram, sons of Eliab, and On son of Peleth--became insolent 2 and rose up against Moses. With them were 250 Israelite men, well-known community leaders who had been appointed members of the council. 3 They came as a group to oppose Moses and Aaron and said to them, "You have gone too far! The whole community is holy, every one of them, and the LORD is with them. Why then do you set yourselves above the LORD's assembly?"

In verses 4-7 Moses says, "Tomorrow morning God will show you who is holy – who is the true leader that He has appointed over Israel." This is a major showdown. Korah not only had his 150 men, but all the city leaders were on his side. Who would the people follow? Who is the true leader? Moses or Korah?

Moses: "In the morning the LORD will show you who belongs to Him, [In the Greek translation of Jesus' day (the Septuagint, or LXX) it said: "for the LORD knows who are his"]. Note: Most quotations in the New Testament from the Old Testament are quoted verbatim from the LXX. Some are direct translations from the Hebrew, which are better than the LXX translation. Others are a mix or paraphrase.¹

4 When Moses heard this, he fell facedown. 5 Then he said to Korah and all his followers: "In the morning the LORD will show who belongs to him and who is holy, and he will have that person come near him. The man he chooses he will cause to come near him. 6 You, Korah, and all your followers are to do this: Take censers 7 and tomorrow put fire and incense in them before the LORD. The man the LORD chooses will be the one who is holy. You Levites have gone too far!"

So the point of the Old Testament passage is, God knows which leader is the true leader that He appointed, and He will make that clear tomorrow morning. The next morning arrived, and God came. It was time for Him to make clear to the people which was His appointed leader. And when God comes to make it clear who the true leader is, the first thing He says is in verse 23:

23 Then the LORD said to Moses, 24 "Say to the assembly, 'Move away from the tents of Korah, Dathan and Abiram.'"

God says, "I'm about to make it clear which one is truly the leader I sent. Oh – and a word to the wise before I begin – don't be standing too close to Korah's tent." Now when God said that, can you imagine what that was like for Korah? Korah and his guys are standing there and God says, "OK, I'm going to reveal who the true leader is, everyone back away from Korah's tent – farther, farther..." So in

¹ Terry, p.500

verse 27 the people scoot back to a safe distance. Then in verse 31 God sends a sign. And from this very subtle sign the people are to discern who the true leader is:

31 As soon as he finished saying all this, the ground under them split apart 32 and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them, with their households and all Korah's men and all their possessions. 33 They went down alive into the grave, with everything they owned; the earth closed over them, and they perished and were gone from the community. 34 At their cries, all the Israelites around them fled, shouting, "The earth is going to swallow us too!" 35 And fire came out from the LORD and consumed the 250 men who were offering the incense.

The second quotation is a paraphrase from verse 26. **“Move back from the tents of the wicked men.”** (Paul phrases it this way: If you confess the name of the Lord, turn away from the wicked men.) Stand over by Moses, not with them. I guess it’s pretty clear who God’s leader is – he’s the one who is still alive. You can’t miss him – he’s the one who is not burned to a crisp or buried alive.

Now, back to 2 Timothy 2. What is Paul talking about in context? He’s talking about false teachers/leaders.

17 Their teaching will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, 18 who have wandered away from the truth. They say that the resurrection has already taken place, and they destroy the faith of some.

These false self-appointed leaders are gaining a following. The people are deciding whom to follow. Should we follow these men, or should we follow Paul and Timothy?

19 Nevertheless, God's solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: "The Lord knows those who are his," and, "Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness."

When Paul quotes Numbers 16 (which was a very familiar story), the meaning was clear. Paul is saying, “Listen folks, someday soon the Lord is going to show whether or not these men are His true appointed leaders, or phonies. And when that happens, I wouldn’t be standing too close to them if I were you.”

Can you see how different that is from the typical understanding of this passage? The meaning becomes very clear, and makes perfect sense in the context, once we study the Old Testament passage. But if all you do is look at the words themselves, you don’t get the meaning.

1000 extra credit points if you can determine the point of the quotation in Ephesians 4:8.
