



# Systematic Theology

A study of the major doctrines of Scripture

TOPIC 7 – HERMENEUTICS: BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION  
LESSON 128 – THE MEANING OF WORDS

*PRINCIPLES OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION* – LOUIS BERKHOF, PGS. 67-82  
*KNOWING SCRIPTURE* – RC SPROUL, PGS. 87-94

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# Determining the Meaning of Words

- ▶ Thoughts are expressed through the relationships of words with one another. Each individual word contributes something to the whole of the content expressed. The better we understand the individual words used in biblical statements, the better we will be able to understand the total meaning of Scripture.
- ▶ To demonstrate the task of understanding the language of the Bible, a valuable exegetical tool we have is the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* edited by Gerhard Kittel. This work looks at every verse in the New Testament that a particular word is found in and then traces that word through classical Greek usage and its corresponding usage in the Greek copy of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, and includes a study of word usage in early church history. For only the NT, this work is comprised of 10 large volumes!

# Etymology and Customary Usage

- ▶ Two basic methods by which words are defined are by etymology and by customary usage.
- ▶ Etymology (not entomology, that bugs me) is the science of word derivations. For example, the word hippopotamus comes from the Greek word hippo (horse) and potamos (river). So a hippo is a river horse.
- ▶ Studying the root and original meanings of words helps us gain an understanding of the concept, or thought, being conveyed by the usage of the word.
- ▶ Another example, the Hebrew word for “glory” means weighty, or heavy, thus the glory of God has to do with His “weightiness” or “significance.”

# Etymology and Customary Usage

- ▶ In addition to the derivations of words, it is extremely important for us to study language in the context of its usage. Words undergo changes in meaning depending on how they are used.
- ▶ The etymological meaning of a word does not always shed light on its current signification. For example, the word “cute” in the Elizabethan Period means “bow-legged.”
- ▶ Another example, the word “scan” used to mean “to read carefully, in close detail”, but now it means “to skim over.”
- ▶ So many people misuse and misunderstand so many words that the misuse becomes the customary meaning and understanding!

# Multiple Meanings

- ▶ Think about the changes in the words web, surf, and mouse, and how they have changed over the last 40 years.
- ▶ There are also words with multiple meanings and only the context can help us determine what the word means as it is being used in that sentence.
- ▶ When the Bible talks about the will of God, there are 6 different things that this can refer to.
- ▶ Sometimes the word will refers to the precepts God has revealed to His people. This is His “prescribed will.”
- ▶ The term will also is used to describe God’s sovereign action by which He brings to pass whatever He wills to happen. This is God’s efficacious will; it effects what He wants.

# Multiple Meanings

- ▶ There is also the sense of will being “that which is pleasing to God, that which He delights is.”
- ▶ So let’s work on defining a passage of Scripture using these 3 definitions of God’s will: 2 Peter 3:9 The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.
- ▶ This could mean 1) God has legislated a precept that no one is allowed to perish – in other words, it is against God’s law for us to perish.
- ▶ 2) God has sovereignly decreed and effected most certainly that no one will ever perish.
- ▶ 3) God is not pleased or delighted when people perish.
- ▶ Which is it?

# Multiple Meanings

- ▶ Answer: 4) None of the above!
- ▶ To understand we need to move to a broader context. Who is being addressed in the Second letter of Peter?
- ▶ “Simon Peter, a bondservant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who have obtained like precious faith with us by the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 1:1)
- ▶ “Beloved, I now write to you this second epistle (in both of which I stir up your pure minds by way of reminder)” (2 Peter 3:1)
- ▶ Who was the audience for his first epistle? “Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To the pilgrims of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, 2 elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 1:1)

# Multiple Meanings

- ▶ So Peter is writing to the “elect”, and “those who have obtained like precious faith with us.”
- ▶ Then, as he writes, “The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” who does he have in mind? The elect.
- ▶ God is not willing that any of His elect should perish, but that every one of His elect should come to repentance.
- ▶ John 6:37 All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out. 38 For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. 39 This is the will of the Father who sent Me, that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up at the last day.



# Multiple Meanings

- ▶ Now. Let's look at the word "justify" in Romans 3:28 "Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law."
- ▶ In James 2:24 we read, "You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only."
- ▶ If the word justify means the same thing in both verses then we have an irreconcilable contradiction between two Biblical writers on a matter at the heart of the gospel.
- ▶ Luther calls justification by faith the article upon which the church stands or falls and as a result he did not like the Book of James!

# Multiple Meanings

- ▶ Paul further insists in Romans 4 that Abraham is justified when he believes the promise of God before he is even circumcised (Rom. 4:9).
- ▶ James says, “Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar?” (James 2:21).
- ▶ The term justify may mean 1) to restore to a state of reconciliation with God those who stand under the judgment of His law, or 2) to demonstrate or to vindicate.
- ▶ Jesus states, “Wisdom is justified by all her children.” (Luke 7:35). Does He mean wisdom is restored to fellowship with God and saved from His wrath? Obviously not. The plain meaning of His words is that a wise act produces good fruit. Wisdom then is vindicated by the result.

# Multiple Meanings

- ▶ In Romans, Paul is speaking about justification in the theological sense as it relates to reconciliation with God and how it is affected – namely by faith alone and not works.
- ▶ James is dealing with a practical question, given in James 2:14, “What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him?” James is asking, “What kind of faith is necessary for salvation?”
- ▶ He is saying that true faith brings forth works. James calls faith without works a dead faith that cannot save.
- ▶ People can say that they have faith when they in fact have no faith. Their claim to have faith is vindicated or justified when we see the fruit of true faith, namely, good works.
- ▶ So we see that justification is by faith alone, but not by faith that is alone.

# Doctrinal Concepts

- ▶ One category of words that can be difficult is a group of words that have come to be used for doctrinal concepts. For example, there is the word “save” and the corresponding word, “salvation.”
- ▶ In the biblical world, a person was saved if they experienced any deliverance from any kind of trouble or calamity. People rescued from military defeat, injury, disease, or even death have been saved.
- ▶ Yet ultimately, salvation comes when we are rescued from the power of sin and death, and escape the wrath of God. From this specific kind of “saving” we have developed the doctrine of salvation.
- ▶ The problem comes when we come to the Scriptures and read this ultimate meaning of the doctrine of salvation into every text that uses the word, “salvation”, or “saved.”

# Doctrinal Concepts

- ▶ For example, Paul writes in 1 Tim. 2:15, “Nevertheless she will be saved in childbearing if they continue in faith, love, and holiness, with self-control.”
- ▶ Does that mean that child-bearing is a second path to salvation?
- ▶ Obviously Paul must be speaking of a different level of salvation when he uses the term here.
- ▶ Also, in 1 Corinthians 7:14 we read, “For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy.”
- ▶ If we consider this passage from the perspective of sanctification, what can we conclude?

# Doctrinal Concepts

- ▶ If sanctification comes after justification and Paul says an unbelieving spouse is sanctified, that can only mean that unbelieving spouses are also justified. Salvation by marriage!
- ▶ This happens because we have taken the word sanctification and applied to it the full and ultimate doctrinal understanding of the term, but the Bible uses the term simply to mean “set apart”, or “consecrated.”
- ▶ If two non-believers marry and one becomes a believer, the non-believer is placed in a special relationship to the body of Christ for the sake of the children. This has nothing to do with redemption.
- ▶ These examples show us how important it is to gain a careful knowledge of the words employed in Scripture. Countless controversies have developed and heresies born simply by failing to see the multiple meanings of words.

# Next Week

- ▶ Lesson 129 - Parables, Proverbs, and Prophecy