

HOW TO RIGHTLY INTERPRET THE BIBLE

By Denver Cheddie

Consider the following statement and a few possible interpretations.

Statement:

"I work 13 hours a day, I must be superhuman."

Spiritual interpretation:

13 is an unlucky number, so the speaker is a very unlucky person, maybe even demon possessed. It is best to stay away from people like that.

Symbolic interpretation:

$13 = 7 + 6$. 7 is the number of God, while 6 is the number of man. So what the author is saying is that he is the God-man. He confirms this by claiming to be superhuman. This person may very well be the antichrist.

Sensible interpretation:

This person literally works 13 hours a day. His use of the term, superhuman, is clearly figurative, indicating that he doesn't know how

he does it. Maybe it is God who gives him the strength to pull that off, and if so, God can also give me strength to do the seemingly difficult things in my life.

As unbelievably stupid as the first two interpretations are, I submit to you that this is how many people interpret the Bible today.

Is there a right way or a wrong way to interpret the Bible? Or are there many valid interpretations of a passage of scripture? The difference between cults and orthodox Christians often lies in the interpretation of a few scriptures. This tells us that proper interpretation is critical to formulating sound doctrine. In this article, I detail what I believe to be the best way to interpret the Bible, and I give an example of it using the well known passage, Romans 12:1,2.

Common Methods of Interpretation

There are various ways people interpret the Bible. One way is personalizing, spiritualizing or symbolizing everything. These folks always look for spiritual meanings behind all scriptures, analogies, parables etc. The problem with this is that there are so many possible spiritual interpretations of any given passage of scripture, how do we know which are right and which are wrong? What makes me right and someone else wrong? Because I'm Protestant?

How does that make my interpretation right? The Bible is above any denomination.

Usually each person comes up with his/her own spiritual interpretation, which heavily depends on that person's religious background and experiences. And what eventually happens is people speaking into God's Word rather than allowing God's Word to speak to them. Instead of getting out of the Word the message God intended to convey, they end up squeezing their pet doctrines into it. And of course, it was the "Holy Spirit" who gave them that interpretation, so who could question them?

No where in the Bible are we told that the Holy Spirit interprets the scriptures for us. It is our job to rightly divide the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15). The Holy Spirit enlightens us, illuminates the word to us, He leads us into all truth, and He brings back to our remembrance what the Word says when we need it. In other words, the Holy Spirit helps us to put the Word into practice in our daily lives. But we could only put into practice what we understand the Word to be. So if our interpretation is faulty, our lifestyles may also be corrupt, because we will end up putting the wrong thing into practice. The sad thing is that we don't know it's wrong. But doesn't the Holy Spirit convict us? Of course He does, but it is possible for our consciences to become dull to His conviction. One sure way to accomplish that is to ingrain into our minds false interpretations of God's word.

Another very common method of interpretation is no method at all. Most people who don't even interpret the Bible. They have their denomination tell

them what they ought to believe, and they read that into the scriptures. In other words, they have their preconceived ideas of what truth is, and they make the Bible subservient to their denominational teachings. Thus their religion becomes an idol of sorts. This is not at all dissimilar to the oral traditions of the Pharisees. These oral traditions were initially intended to safe guard the word of God from doctrinal errors, but over time, they began to take priority over God's Word in the minds of many. That is why Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for placing their traditions above the law of God (Matthew 15:1-6; Mark 7:3-13).

The Best Method of Interpretation

The bible is a book written by over 40 authors 1500 years apart. We believe that it was given by inspiration of the Holy Spirit (2 Timothy 3:16), such that He moved upon holy men as they wrote (2 Peter 1:21). I believe that the ideas presented in the Bible depict the mind of God. Thus the Bible, rightly interpreted, presents us with the voice of God for just about any situation we could face. But it must be rightly interpreted. If it is wrongly interpreted, what you get is your own voice speaking into the Bible rather than God's voice speaking from the Bible.

Each book of the Bible was written by a certain author or group of authors to a very specific audience who were facing specific circumstances. There was a primary message that the authors intended to convey to that audience. I believe it is crucial that we first attempt to understand this primary message

before we can do anything else with the Bible. To understand this primary message, it is important to bridge the cultural and historical gap between us and the original audience so we could better understand the circumstances they were facing. This would in turn help us to better understand the original message intended by the author. In so doing, we also better understand the mind of God as He interacted with the original audience.

Once we obtain that information, we can then proceed to apply the message to our own lives; or if you wish, to determine what is God's extended message to us. Personalizing the message without first understanding the primary message may result in us personalizing the wrong thing. From the original message, we see how God dealt with people in given circumstances. From that we develop a better idea of how God is, and how He would act in another similar circumstance. If this is how God acted in that situation, then this is how God would most likely act in this situation. Thus we better understand the mind of God, and we get a sense of how He is directing us based on how He revealed Himself in His Word. Once our knowledge base of the Bible increases, it is easier to be led by the Holy Spirit, because now the Spirit has something to work with. But it is so much more convenient for people to seek some mythical "small still voice", even though that voice may be their own mind playing tricks on them. But when we take the time and effort to really get to know God through His Word, the Bible becomes a love letter, a revelation of God, the voice of God, God's answer to just about any problem we may face, and so much more. The Bible is so much more than just a collection of proof texts. But so many Christians allow laziness to rob them of this treasure God has left for them.

Once we determine the original intended message and the proper application of that to our lives, then we can go ahead and spiritualize and symbolize and find other possible interpretations. But these spiritual meanings must be judged very critically to ensure that they are consistent with the Bible. The most meaningful interpretation is that which comes directly or indirectly out of the immediate context. Other interpretations may arise out of the wider context, but must always be consistent with the rest of the Bible. This is why seeking spiritual meanings alone is dangerous. If all you know is spiritual interpretations of scripture, then you never really know what the primary message of the Bible is, neither it's main doctrines – unless of course your denomination tells you, and how do you even know that they are right? And if you don't know what the primary messages of the books of the Bible are, how are you going to judge all of these spiritual interpretations? In the end, it comes down to my interpretation vs. yours. I think I'm right, and you think you are. We are at a stalemate. The best thing is to let the Bible speak to us. Once we know the primary meaning, then we can venture into secondary and tertiary meanings.

An Example – Romans 12:1,2

Let us apply this method of interpretation to Romans 12:1,2

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be

transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God. (NKJV).

The word, "*therefore*", strongly indicates that what is written in these 2 verses cannot be separated from what was written before. In fact the first 11 chapters of Romans lay a doctrinal foundation for the practical exhortations which begin in chapter 12. This is a very typical style of writing adopted by the apostle Paul.

After having discussed the depravity of man (chapters 1-3), God's free gift of salvation (chapters 4-6), the inadequacy of the law (chapter 7), our freedom in Christ (chapter 8); Paul goes on to talk about God's plan for the Jews and the Gentiles (chapters 9-11).

Briefly, the message is that God temporarily rejected the Jews because of their unbelief, and offered salvation to the Gentiles to provoke the Jews to jealousy, and ultimately to win them back (11:14). Thus God would end up saving both Jews and Gentiles (11:32). In chapter 11, Paul also warns the Gentile believers against pride and boastfulness (11:18), which strongly indicates that a problem with the Romans was that the Gentile believers somehow thought they were superior to the Jewish believers. Paul warns them against such pride by showing them what the bigger plan of God was on how they fit into it.

It is in this contextual backdrop that Paul enters chapter 12. He is imploring them to adopt a new way of thinking. They should think in terms of self-sacrificing service to one another (the way of Christ), rather than competition against one another (the way of the world). The term, living sacrifice, is clearly a contrast and comparison to Jesus, who presented Himself as a dying sacrifice. Ours are to be lives of self-sacrifice for the purpose of serving one another. Paul is urging them to start thinking this way – renew their mind.

They should keep in mind the bigger plan of God, which is God's plan for the Jews and Gentiles. They should understand where they fit into that plan and be humble about it. There is no place for pride. God's plan was for the Gentiles to be saved in order to provoke the Jews to jealousy, so that they would return to Him. This is the contextual meaning of "proving what is that ... perfect will of God". The will of God, in this context, is best understood as God's plan for humanity. When the Gentiles live godly Christ-like lives, they prove to the Jews that God has indeed chosen them. This is what God wants - to provoke the Jews to a holy jealousy.

Now how do we apply this to our own lives? We see that God wants us to think differently from the world – self sacrifice rather than competition. We see that God has a perfect plan for humanity, and where we fit into that plan. We also see that how we live our lives affects other people and may result in them coming to Christ. Therefore we should be mindful of these things. The rest of chapter 12 and chapters 13-15 give practical exhortations based on this theological foundation. We should use our spiritual gifts to serve others (chapter 12). Our Christian conduct should permeate our

relationships with the secular authorities (chapter 13) and other Christian brothers (chapters 14,15). We should be mindful that what we do affects other people. For example, if eating meat offends our brother, for his sake, don't do it. In a modern day sense, don't go to nightclubs if that causes weaker Christians to stumble. It doesn't matter if you don't commit fornication. This scripture provides us with answers to questions like, "Should Christians go to bars?"

What do we learn about God from this scripture? Judging from the way God used the unbelief of the Jews to draw the Gentiles to Christ, and then in turn to draw the Jews back to Him; it tells you that God knows how to improvise. It shows you how wise and unsearchable His ways are (11:33). That tells me that even if I make mistakes, God is on top of it. There is no mistake I could make that would write me out of God's will. He knew it was coming, and He had a plan in place to turn it around for good. That gives me confidence in serving God. I don't have to worry about God forsaking me. I need to have a reverential fear of God (11:20), but worry, no. God has a way of turning around what the devil planned for evil, and bringing good out of it. Therefore, I don't have to be afraid of the devil or any of his devices. God is in control. God is wiser than the devil is subtle. I learned that from Romans 11, which provides the wider context for chapter 12.

Compare this to those superficial interpretations you often hear for Romans 12:1,2. Some see this passage as a reference to praise and worship because it uses the word "sacrifice", and we are to bring the "sacrifice of praise" to God. Others see positive thinking in the "renewing of your mind" part. Yet others understand the "perfect will of God" to be some fixed rigid plan that

God has for each person's individual life, which was predestined before the foundation of the world. As a result they strive to make every decision based on a clear directive from God rather than a reliance on the principles of God's word. For example, they would like to know which job God wants them to have, rather than being content to serve God through whatever job they have.

These are all possible secondary interpretations of the passage in question. They all must be checked with the rest of the scripture for validity. But neither of them is the original meaning intended by the author, as determined from the context of the passage. These other interpretations may be valid, but they are secondary not primary.

But you decide for yourself. Which method of interpretation tells us most about God? Which one allows us to see God as He reveals Himself to us in His Word? Which method is most likely to guard against false doctrines, contrary to God's Word?

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