



UNDERSTANDING SCRIPTURE

How to Read and Interpret the Bible

5 - THE EPISTLES

INTERPRETING NEW TESTAMENT EPISTLES

1. Two reasons we must learn to read the epistles, letters in the New Testament, is that they are the most familiar books of the Bible and seem to be somewhat easy to interpret. After all, who needs help to understand that “all have sinned” (Romans 3:23), that “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23), and that “by grace you have been saved, through faith” (Ephesians 2:8), or “walk by the Spirit” (Galatians 5:16) and “walk in the way of love” (Ephesians 5:2)? On the other hand, the “ease” of interpreting epistles can be quite deceptive. This is especially so at the level of hermeneutics. Try leading others through 1 Corinthians, for example, and see how difficult that might be.
2. The form of many of the New Testament letters consists of six parts:
 - A. The name of the writer (Paul).
 - B. The name of the recipient (The church of God which is at Corinth).
 - C. The greeting (Grace to you and peace from God our Father).
 - D. The prayer or thanksgiving (I always thank God for you).
 - E. The body of the letter.
 - F. The final greeting and farewell (The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you.)
3. In spite of their differences, the epistles are all _____ documents addressing a specific occasion or need. Although inspired by the Holy Spirit, they were first written out of the context of the author to the context of the original recipients.
4. In reading the epistles we have the answers, but we do not always know what the questions or problems were. It’s like hearing one end of a telephone conversation and trying to figure out who is on the other end and what that unseen party is saying.
5. **The first and basic rule** is that a text _____ what it never could have meant to its author or readers. This is why exegesis must always come first. This rule does not help one find out what a given passage means, but it does help to set limits as to what it cannot mean.
6. **The second rule** is that whenever we share _____



(similar specific life situations) with the first-century hearers, God’s word to us is the same as his word to them.

7. **The third rule** is to think contextually, in paragraphs. The basic context is the _____ book.
 - A. It helps, when studying an epistle, to read the letter all the way through in one sitting. Then create paragraph headings and follow the basic exegetical sheet (Lesson 3 - Context, page 5).

THE PROBLEM OF EXTENDED APPLICATION

1. When there are similar situations and contexts, is it appropriate to extend the application of a text to other contexts, or to make a first-century case-specific matter apply to a context totally foreign to its first-century setting? This is a delicate practice and highly misused today.
 - A. An example is found in Paul’s letter to the believers in Corinth, “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers” (2 Corinthians 6:14). Typically this has been interpreted as forbidding marriage between a Christian and a non-Christian. But, the metaphor of a yoke is never used in ancient times to refer to marriage, and there is nothing in the context that suggests that meaning. Our problem is that we cannot be certain as to what the original text is forbidding. It probably has something to do with believers taking part in idolatry (1 Corinthians 10:14-22).
 - B. Because we can’t be sure of its original meaning do you think it would be proper to “extend” the meaning of the text above to the currently accepted meaning? Why or why not?
2. We must also determine whether a text is communicating a standard of God, such as the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20, or a cultural behavior or situation.
 - A. Paul’s list of sins in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and Galatians 5:19-21 do not necessarily contain cultural issues. Some of the sins may be more prevalent in one culture than another, but there are never situations in which they may be considered Christian behavior. Sexual immorality, adultery, idolatry, drunkenness, homosexuality, stealing, greed, etc. are always wrong.
 - B. On the other hand, foot washing, the holy kiss, eating food offered to idols, women having a head covering when praying or prophesying, Paul’s personal preference for celibacy, or women teaching in the church are not inherently moral matters. They were cultural issues for a particular people in a particular place.

PAUL’S LETTER TO PHILEMON

1. Paul was the writer of the letter to Philemon.
2. The recipients of the letter were Philemon, a wealthy member of the church in Colossae, Apphia, Archippus and the church which met in Philemon’s home.
3. The date of Paul’s writing was about 60 to 61 AD while he was in prison.
4. The purpose and content of the letter.



- A. The letter to Philemon was one of Paul’s prison epistles in Rome. While being held under house arrest there, Paul received a visitor named Onesimus, whose name meant “profitable” or “advantage.” Onesimus had proven to be anything but profitable! He was a runaway slave who had fled from his master, a man named Philemon. When Onesimus ran away, he probably took with him money and supplies which belonged to his master Philemon, something runaway slaves did. Onesimus made his way to Rome, met Paul and through his teachings became a Christian. A bond of friendship developed between Paul, who could not leave the house, and Onesimus who probably ran errands for Paul. Paul would have kept Onesimus but honored the tie that bound a slave to his master and decided Onesimus should return to Philemon.
 - B. Paul did not command Philemon to free his slave Onesimus. Rather, Paul commended Philemon for the loving compassion he showed to his fellow Christians and then interceded in Onesimus’ behalf. Slaves, such as Onesimus, who were brought back to their masters were often treated more harshly and under Roman law could be killed. Paul noted that Philemon was having Onesimus come back to him as more than a slave but as a brother in Christ and fellow believer. Paul asked that Philemon would receive Onesimus as he would receive Paul himself. Since it was quite possible that Onesimus had wronged Philemon and was indebted to Philemon for what he had stolen, Paul even offered to have Philemon charge the debt to him so that Paul might repay him. In offering to repay that indebtedness, Paul reminded Philemon that he owed him his very life, for it seems that as a result of Paul’s ministry Philemon had become a believer in Christ himself.
 - C. Paul was about to send Tychicus, a co-worker, to Colossae with a letter Paul had written to the church there. Tychicus’ traveling to Colossae gave Paul the opportunity to send Onesimus with Tychicus back to Philemon. Onesimus went willingly as a Christian to seek his master’s forgiveness and to return to his duties in Philemon’s household.
5. The theme of Philemon: In love we _____ those who sin against us as God forgives our sins against him for Jesus’ sake.

THE OUTLINE

- 1. The greeting (1-3)
 - A. Greeting to Philemon, to Apphia who may have been Philemon’s wife, to Archippus and to the church at Colossae that met in Philemon’s home (Colossians 4:17).
- 2. Thanksgiving & prayer for Philemon (4-7).
 - A. Thanksgiving for his faith and love (4-5).
 - B. Prayer for the effectiveness of his fellowship and faith (6-7).
- 3. Paul’s plea in behalf of Onesimus (8-20).
 - A. Paul issues no command to Philemon but appeals to him to do what is proper for the sake of Christian love, Philemon (8-9).
 - B. Paul appeals in behalf of Onesimus, who formerly was useless (useful only as a slave) to Philemon, but who is now useful to both Paul and Philemon as a brother (10-11).
 - C. Paul is sending Onesimus back to Philemon. Paul desired to have Onesimus remain in Rome

with him to aid him in his gospel ministry, but Paul would not retain Onesimus without Philemon's consent (12-14).

- D. Onesimus is being returned to Philemon as more than a slave, but as a Christian brother in the faith, Philemon (15-16).
 - E. Paul appeals to Philemon to receive Onesimus as he would receive Paul himself, that is, as a partner in the faith (17).
 - F. Paul offers to repay Philemon for whatever loss Onesimus may have caused him (18-20).
4. Conclusion (21-25).
- A. Paul's confidence in Philemon and request for lodging when Paul is released from prison and can come to Philemon and Colossae (21-22).
 - B. Closing greetings (23-25).

THE APPLICATION

1. Treating our brothers and sisters in Christ as members of Christ's Body.
2. _____, no matter how great the offense.
3. Lawsuits (1 Corinthians 6).
4. Christian leaders must recognize that God holds them accountable for the treatment of those who work for them, whether the helpers are Christians or not. They must eventually answer to God for their actions (Colossians 4:1).
5. What other issues can we apply to our lives today?

ASSIGNMENT

1. Weekly Time Sheet
2. Meet with your accountability partner
3. Daily devotions
4. Read the lesson
5. Memorize Romans 10:17
6. Journal

ANSWERS

occasional
cannot mean
comparable particulars
entire
forgive
Forgiveness

WEEKLY TIME SHEET - UNDERSTANDING SCRIPTURE

Ephesians 5:16 ...redeeming the time...

1. Name _____ Date _____

2. My accountability partners _____

3. Scripture memory verse (Write it from memory below before class)

4. Journaling (Briefly write the main thoughts and continue on other side if necessary)

Check each box below as you do the activity for that day

ACTIVITIES	SAT	SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI
Personal prayer time							
Bible reading & journaling							
Lesson reading							
Fasting							
Scripture memorization							
Sunday AM & Wednesday PM							
Accountability meeting/connection							
Volunteer service (specify below)							
I've invited a new person to church							