
a *Grace Notes* course

Foundations I

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Foundations 105

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Lesson 12 – Interpret Comparatively

This principle of comparative interpretation focuses on the internal consistency of the Word of God, pointing us to the importance of comparing Scripture with Scripture to analyze similarities in subject matter, so that we might arrive at correct meanings.

It is important to compare subjects similar to one another, such as grace and mercy, and also subjects very different from one another, such as God and Satan. When we compare similarities and differences of subjects in remote contexts, we put together a picture that has been cut into pieces - sometimes a great number of pieces. Theology is developed by putting these pieces together.

Not only the novice (1 Tim 3:6), but also the experienced interpreter must be careful in the development of theology (Prov 3:5-6), realizing that important details within the 31,000+ verses of Scripture may have been overlooked. The sheer volume of material we are trying to understand should keep us aware of the potential for error, and therefore keep us humble.

As we compare Scripture with Scripture, we come to find out that a given theological issue is considered in many parts of the Bible. One example is the issue of “Justification by Faith” (Gen 15:6; Rom 3-4). When we find a contrasting passage that speaks of a “Justification by Works,” such as found in James 2:14-26, we must consider both passages. When we put both passages together, we understand “works” as necessary in the plan of God, as an outgrowth of the faith that led to salvation, but not as a means to acquire salvation. This principle is also taught in Ephesians 2:8-10. We are “saved by grace through faith,” and have been “created for good works.”

This same principle teaches us to beware of building theology or doctrine on passages or textual readings of questionable intent. For example, the Greek text from Mark 16:9 to the end of the book is very uncertain. Some people have built doctrine on these passages, which has resulted in erroneous theology.

Another example of the importance of comparing Scripture with Scripture is seen in the identification of the “mystery” (namely, something unknown) which is referred to many times in the New Testament. Normally, if we were studying Ephesians 3 and ran into the word “mystery” we would try to answer the question, “what is the mystery?” Our answer, however, is found in Colossians 1:25-27, which says:

“Of this church I was made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit, that I might fully carry out the preaching of the word of God; that is, the mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations; but has now been manifested to His saints, to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.”

The “mystery” is identified by Scripture as a new intimate relationship with the Messiah. This relationship is for the new era known as the Church Age.

Lesson 13 – Interpret Harmoniously

This principle recognizes the truthfulness and faithfulness of God, that He is not the author of confusion (1 Cor 14:33). In other words there are no real contradictions in the Bible. The Bible is unified, framed and inspired by the Living God, thus all its components are consistent.

Disagreements concerning interpretations of Scripture are human in scope, not Divine. Many people base their emotional security on their own understanding of God’s Word, but Scripture warns us against doing this (John 5:37; Prov 3:5-6; 2 Cor 5:7). We will never understand some things in the Bible clearly or completely until such time as we meet the Lord face to face (1 Cor 13:12). So, the issue for us is always that we walk by faith (Heb 11:6; Col 2:6), trusting God to lead us to our heavenly home.

When we come to understand how two seemingly contradictory verses actually complement one another, we gain wisdom. We are told in the first part of the book of Proverbs that when we learn to

understand difficult statements and riddles, we become wise (Prov 1:2-6). This requires diligent study. For example, as we have already discussed, we must consider James 2, and the passage of Romans 3-4 to understand correctly the relationship between faith and works.

When looking for relationships between passages, we should be aware of indicators for time or place, realizing that every small detail may not have been written down, or that a problem may exist in the translation. Regardless, we must keep in mind that there are no true contradictions found in God's Word.

We should also realize that God's Word frequently states the same principle in different ways so that what is important might be more fully grasped. For example, Romans 3:23 says, "all have sinned..." likewise, the book of Leviticus commands all to bring sin offerings. Both passages essentially say the same thing.

What also becomes quite clear from the study of the Bible is that God directed the literary structure of His Word and its organization.

Lesson 14 – Interpret Literally

This is the principle under which God says what He means and means what He says. This is an extremely important principle because it guides us in our understanding of the Word. When we instruct our own children, we try to communicate as clearly as possible the things we want them to remember. Often we'll discuss something in many different ways so that their little minds will grasp it and not lose hold (Heb 1:1). Are we not God's children (1 John 3:1)? Is He not our "Daddy" ("ABBA" in Romans 8:15)? Literal interpretation means that we (as God's children) literally accept what God clearly says as the truth.

It makes sense to look in the Word for simple, clear, direct, and universal statements first. Obviously the clearer verses will shed light on passages that are unclear.

One example of a simple, clear, direct, and universal statement is found in Romans 8:1, which says, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." This verse is an accomplished fact. There are no uncertain words, such as "maybe," "might," or "if." Those who are "in Christ Jesus" are those who have received eternal life, according to Romans 6:23: "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." Those who are saved face no condemnation.

We find the same type of statement in Romans 3:23 which says, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." The condition of sin, according to the Bible, is universal to mankind - with the exception of Jesus Christ (1 Pet 2:22). The Bible alone establishes the rule, thus, the Bible alone can offer the exception to the rule. We as students are not at liberty to make exceptions to the universal statements that God makes in His Word. Therefore, except for Jesus Christ, we are all sinners.

Automatically assuming "hidden" or "deeper" meanings of Scripture is irresponsible. As we have already discussed, an allegorical approach to Scripture tries to add to God's Word. A "mythological" approach tries to take away from God's Word. God has been careful to warn us against either (Rev 22:18-19), since they negate the importance of the literal meaning of God's Word.

The Bible is grounded in literal history and is thus significant to all of history (cf. 1 Cor 15). Failure to consider it literally has led to many theological distortions throughout the history of Israel and the Church.

Other examples of universal statements that we should remember are, Romans 8:35-39, John 3:16,18,36, Ephesians 2:8-10, 1 John 2:1-2, and Titus 3:5.