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Hermeneutics

by

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Thesis

Hermeneutics should be a basic tool for any person wanting to further their studies in the Bible. It takes the focus away from the self perspective and allows the reader to understand the words in the perspective of the author. Once the context and perspective is understood, then interpretation becomes transformational and applicable to the reader.

Introduction

Often times, a passage from the Bible is taught in a way that it becomes misinterpreted. The passage is taken out of context, not intentionally, and the application of the passage is not the intentions of the original author. There is a process of exegesis that one can use to rightly interpret the Bible. This process is called hermeneutics. What is hermeneutics? How is it helpful in studying the word of God? This paper will discuss in detail why hermeneutics is important in studying the word of God. Secondly, it will provide a passage of scripture in which hermeneutics is applied to show how affective it is for interpreting. There are many guidelines for the hermeneutical process of exegesis. In this research paper, the guideline that will be used for interpreting the Bible is identifying the text and literary context. This guideline interprets the text and its literary surroundings. Lastly, this paper will show how the process of hermeneutics, to interpret a passage, then allows the reader to make a correct application from the passage. If the Bible can't be applied to the current generation, then the relevancy of it is diminished. The Bible is the living word of God, therefore it must speak to today's current generation for it to be the inspired words of God.

Hermeneutics Defined and Explained

In the book, “A Short Introduction to Hermeneutics,” Jasper wrote, “The word hermeneutics is an English form of the classical Greek word hermeneus, which means an interpreter or expounder-one who explains things.”¹ Hermeneutics comes from Greek mythology and is based on Hermes, who was the messenger of the gods. His job was to carry the messages of the gods to the people on earth. He was the voice between two different worlds and the mediator to connect two completely different beings; the infinite to the finite and the divine to the earthly. Then is how we get the name hermeneutics as the process of interpreting divine passages such as the Holy Bible. Jasper goes on to write that, “Hermeneutics, then, is about “interpretation” or even “translation,” and especially the interpretation of sacred text, which believers may understand as in some sense divinely inspires of “the word of God.”² Brown explains hermeneutics as this,

“The short answer is that hermeneutics is the study of the activity of interpretation. In the realm of theory, the term is used to refer to the discipline that analyzes interpretation, specifically, how texts communicate, how meaning is derived from texts and/or their authors, and what it is that people do when they interpret a text.”³

Hermeneutics can be simply defined as interpreting writings but there is more involved than just interpretation. There is also an application that needs to be applied to after an interpretation of the passage. Hermeneutics is necessary when studying the Bible. Hermeneutics is applied when we translate the Greek or Hebrew into the English. It can help us understand the original intent of the word; it gives us a proper interpretation and allows us to understand it more deeply in order to apply it to our everyday lives.

1 Jasper, *A short introduction to hermeneutics*, 7.

2 Ibid, 7

3 Brown, *Scripture as communication: introducing biblical hermeneutics*, 20.

So why is hermeneutics important? The Bible is widely separated in its own culture and customs from our current western society or even the current world. Therefore, there is a need to bridge that gap. The Bible is filled with many differences from our world today. It contains many different genres, such as parables, prophecy, poetry, historical, and many more. The language in the Bible is also a different language that is known and spoken today. While reading a passage of the Bible, we all bring our own mind to interpret the word. Hermeneutics is meant to be unbiased and objective and not to be biased and subjective. James Sire noted:

“If traditional Christianity affirms the Bible as its sole authority, *Sola Scriptura*, as the Reformers said, how can these very different religious movements [i.e., Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mormons, Christian Science] claim Scripture for their own? The obvious answer is the right one, I believe. They can only do so by violating the principles of sound literary interpretation.”⁴

Hermeneutics is needed in order not to make wrong deductions. As stated earlier, when a passage of the Bible is misinterpreted, then applying the passage correctly becomes a greater task. Klein wrote about this in his book called, “Introduction to Biblical Interpretation.” He stated, “Just as the Bible arose within historical, personal circumstances, so does our own interpretations. This requires methods “to guide us in navigating through the variable and subjective human factors to enable us to arrive at the most likely understanding of the biblical texts meaning.”⁵ There are many methods to use for exegesis. Each method is for a different purpose of interpreting and uses different guidelines. This paper will focus on one of the guidelines as mentioned early in the paper.

⁴ Sire, *Scripture twisting: 20 ways the cults misread the Bible*, 12.

⁵ Klein, *Introduction to biblical interpretation*, 45

How to use the Guideline

In the book titled, “Scripture as Communication,” in Appendix A, it gives nine guidelines for hermeneutics and the process of interpretation. In Appendix A, the researcher chose number four as the most helpful. As a youth pastor, he would have chosen number eight, which is to delineate relevant implication for today. This is a guideline that he already utilizes and follows when he is preparing a teaching for the youth. Number four is the guideline that he finds most helpful for his personal studies. By applying this guideline to his daily study, it helped him better understand the Bible. He found himself guilty of finding a verse that fits his teaching. That one verse worked well when used solely, but when he read the entire chapter, he realized that he took that verse out of context.

The guideline is to identify the text and literary context and the text are to be interpreted and its literary surroundings. This guideline challenges the reader to read the entire biblical book a few times to get an overview. This is where a lot of people fail. People don't feel the need or take the time to read the entire book a few times just to get the overview. While reading the entire book, the guideline encourages the reader to notice major themes of the book and to determine the stated purpose of the book. An illustration came to the researcher's mind while thinking about this guideline. It's like getting a steering wheel. You may look at that steering wheel and automatically imply that it goes to a car. Unless you are able to see the rest of what the steering wheel goes too, you won't know for sure if that steering wheel is for a car or not. That steering wheel could be for a truck, van, or even a tractor. He never considered how important it is to look at the entire chapter or book first in order to determine what one passage might be saying.

When looking at the literary content, there are a lot of things to consider. In order to fully understand the context of the passage, one must look at the following areas: genre, time, location, background, history, setting, culture, language, geography, customs, beliefs, practices, and many others. Taking genre as an example, it will demonstrate how important it is to know the genre even in the Bible. The different genres of the Bible are law, history, wisdom poetry, prophecy, gospels, and letters. To make genre understandable, think about the word “pitch.” Without having any context, the meaning of this word can be very vague. If a person is reading a baseball magazine and reads the word pitch, then that person will know that it refers to the act of a pitcher throwing a baseball. If the person is reading a sports magazine about soccer, and reads the word pitch, then he or she will know that it refers to the playing surface known as a “football pitch.” If the person is a musician, then the word “pitch refers to the proper tone of a musical note. Another example is if the person was talking to a roofer and he uses the word “pitch,” then he is describing the angle of the roof, or the black tar used to make the roof waterproof. This is all to show how important genre can be. If genre can make such an impact when interpreting the word of God, then we know the others on the list are important as well.

The guideline challenges the reader to read the entire biblical book a few times to get an overview. This is a method that many do not take when reading the Bible and trying to interpret it. Often times, people read the Bible and will take out the verse that speaks to them during their current state. When a person is able to read the passage a few times over, their focus is taken away from them, and placed back on the words. The passage must be able to speak for itself. This guideline encourages in its methods to engage in a way that the author’s intentions become evident. While reading the passage a few times, looking for key things as listed earlier will help

to find the context of the passage. A passage will be examined to show the importance of hermeneutics and how it helps during exegesis to bring a clear interpretation.

Examining Mark 10:17-27

The Rich and the Kingdom of God

¹⁷As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. “Good teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

¹⁸“Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good—except God alone. ¹⁹You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honor your father and mother.’^[a]”

²⁰“Teacher,” he declared, “all these I have kept since I was a boy.”

²¹Jesus looked at him and loved him. “One thing you lack,” he said. “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

²²At this the man’s face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.

²³Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!”

²⁴The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, “Children, how hard it is^[b] to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

²⁶The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, “Who then can be saved?”

²⁷Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.”

To begin the hermeneutical process, and to make a good exegesis of this passage, the guideline should be used. The person should read this passage a few times to get an overview of the context. This passage opens with Jesus going on his way, and then he is encountered by a man who ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. In studying the Bible, especially the Gospels, it's always good to cross reference the different Gospel accounts. In Luke 18:18, the passage records that the man was a ruler. The word translated "ruler" is the Greek word *archon*, which means: "one who has administrative authority, leader, and official." It is used by various Jewish leaders, including those in charge of a synagogue and members of the Sanhedrin.

Matthew's account adds another detail and refers to the ruler as a "young man," which is lacking from both Mark and Luke: Matthew 19:20 states the young man said to Him, "All these things I have kept; what am I still lacking?" This is an example of a good exegesis to obtain more information and details to further understand the passage and the context.

He asked Jesus, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" The response to Jesus is, "Why do you call me good?" Jesus continues by saying, "No one is good except God alone." Sometimes to better understand a passage, we must look at a previous passage. The question is why did this man run to Jesus and ask this question? If you go back and read the previous passage, in Mark 10:13-16, they were bringing children to Him so that He might touch them; and the disciples rebuked them. 14 But when Jesus saw this, He was indignant and said to them, "Permit the children to come to Me; do not hinder them; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. 15 "Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it at all." 16 And He took them in His arms and began blessing them, laying His hands upon them.

Jesus has just finished teaching the people in order to receive the kingdom of God, one must become like a child. I am sure the man was in the crowd listening and when Jesus had finished, something struck his heart where he needed to know more. Knowing that Jesus was the one who knew more, he ran and fell before Jesus' knees.

What is the characteristic of a child that models what we need to be in order to enter the kingdom of God? He is welcoming the children, but it is also metaphoric in that He is saying there are characteristics of a child that model how we should come, even as adults. The characteristics of children that one may see Jesus is referring to are helplessness and dependence. We must come to Christ with a realization of our helplessness. We must also come with a realization of dependence. From helplessness comes the need to depend on God.

From looking at the previous passage, the issue is one of dependence over being independent and not needing God. Children depend on their parents for everything in life. In contrast to dependent children, the rich man in Mark chapter 10 was relying only on himself and the wealth that he had. The kingdom of God belongs to those who depend on Him rather than being independent and relying on the self. This is a good example of looking at previous passages the help understand and interpret a current passage that is being read.

Continuing in the exegesis of the passage, Jesus answered, "Why do you call me good?" Then Jesus lists some of the commandments such as: you shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, and you shall not defraud, and honor your father and mother. The man declared, "All these I have kept since I was a boy." One may read Jesus' response as ask, why did Jesus quote these specific commandments? Why didn't he use commandments such as, do not take the Lord's name in vein, do not have idols, and no other Gods before me? The majority of rich people, even in today's society, are rich because they

have stolen, lied, defrauded, or cheated. Jesus may have used those commandments to allow this man to have a self check of his heart and life. His response is that he has kept all of them since he was a boy. Jesus wanted to teach the young man something. The man looked at Jesus as being good, but Jesus' response was that there is no one good except God. If Jesus is not good, then how much worse is this rich man? Jesus wanted to rich man to realize that goodness does not equate to the King of Heaven and to Salvation. It is only through a relationship with Jesus are we able to understand who God is and enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

Jesus looked at him and loved him. "One thing you lack," he said. "God, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." A powerful observation is made in this passage. Jesus loved him. This man seemed to have done everything right according to the Law. Jesus' response is powerful and his request is great. We find that Jesus loved this man and wanted a relationship with this man. This man was too caught up in his identity, his possessions, and his own life. Jesus wasn't concerned with his possessions. Being rich is not a sin. Having money is not a sin. There was something greater that Jesus is trying to teach in this passage. The lesson is to have a spirit of dependence, and this dependence is on God. Jesus called this man to get rid of everything that was hindering him to go to God like a child needing a father. Jesus wanted a relationship with just the man and nothing else. In the later part of Mark 10:21, Jesus says to come and follow me. Clearly, this is a call to discipleship. It is an invitation to the utmost self-denial in the form of bountiful kindness. Its outcome, Jesus declares, will be heavenly treasure. Jesus was also trying to show this man that He is God in the flesh. He is telling the man, if you give up your own life and follow my journey, I will teach you and show you how to obtain eternal life.

The man left grieved and the disciples asked, “Then who can be saved?” Jesus in essence says the point I am making about the rich is true for everybody. This is not a problem with money. It’s a problem with the human heart. Jesus is trying to show them that, through his own efforts, no one can be saved. He does not mean just the wealthy cannot be saved, but no one can be saved through his money, skills, talents, intellect, or fame. Salvation was hard for the rich man just because he trusted in his own riches. He found it difficult to feel totally dependent on Jesus. This is one interpretation and application that can be seen from this passage. Many people will have different views, world lens, and journeys when studying this passage, therefore, their interpretation and application may have different variables.

In the exegesis process, a mistake that many people make, is dealing with verse 25. How hard it is to enter the kingdom of God. The verse says, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” If a person was reading this passage from a western context, they would image trying to push a large camel through an eye of a sewing needle. Knowing the culture, background, and history of the text is important. The author was writing for a different audience that could understand the text. The author was writing from a different era, culture, and world view. Studying the history of the Bible, one will find that in the cities during those times, there is a small doorway called the eye of the needle. The only way for a camel to go through this gate is to be stripped of all that it was carrying, and then would have to get on its knees and almost crawl through the gate. Jesus was trying to show the people to have a relationship with God, one must deny themselves, become humbled, and follow Jesus. One can only come to this conclusion by rightly studying the word of God and using the hermeneutical process to make a good exegesis. When a good exegesis is

done, then application of the word takes place, and application takes place, then transformation of the person.

Conclusion

The Bible is the living word of God. Knowing how to study the word is important. Hermeneutics is the beginning of this process. It is much more than just interpreting, it is finding the authentic and genuine context of the passage. It is trying to know what the author was feeling, thinking, and expressing. Along with hermeneutics, the Holy Spirit is the one that teaches, reveals, and instructs the person in the word of God. Without a proper exegesis of a passage, it is difficult to come to a right interpretation. When a passage is misinterpreted, the application of the passage may not be the intentions of the author. Hermeneutics is the process of interpreting the word of God but there are guidelines and methods in place in order to interpret it correctly. The Bible is written universally for all generations, peoples, and nations, even though the Bible was dealing with one people in the word itself. The Bible always points to Jesus. A good exegesis of the Bible should always lead us back to Jesus. Jesus is the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God.

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