

Two Principles of Interpretation

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So far in our study of determining God's will for us, we've seen that God expects us to submit to His authority, that He relates His will to us today through His word, and that our Lord Jesus used the word in a logical, deductive way to determine His Father's expectations. If we were to stop right there, we would have a handle on all the concepts we needed to interpret the Bible and learn what God wants us to do.

However, even though Jesus established a pattern for us of looking to what God has commanded, imitating the righteous men of old who pleased Him, and drawing logical conclusions from Scriptural statements, He didn't go through and explicitly tell us how we should understand and apply every verse in the Bible. That's something that God left for us to figure out on our own, using the logical tools that Jesus left behind. If we do it correctly, we learn to please Him too.

In this search to correctly discern what God wants us to do, there are a couple of ideas that come up over and over again. We extract them from the word just like Jesus did, but instead of answering one question, they answer a whole bunch of questions. If we understand these ideas and apply them correctly, it will keep us out of all kinds of trouble. On the other hand, if we don't understand them, we cannot possibly obey God or build the church that He wants us to build. So that we can avoid this disaster, let's spend the morning considering two principles of interpretation.

Understanding the Covenants.

First, if we want to understand the Bible, we have to come to grips with understanding the covenants. In this sense, a covenant is an agreement between God and a group of people that God will bless them in some way if they obey Him. In the course of human history, God has made two such covenants, and each covenant has a different set of laws that go with it, and He has only ever expected people to obey the laws associated with their covenant.

The first of these divine covenants is commonly called **THE OLD COVENANT**. We see the establishment of this covenant described in Exodus 24:7-8. All of this takes place during the time when the children of Israel are gathered around Mt. Sinai while God is giving the Law to Moses. Here, Moses reads at least part of the Law to them, and the Israelites agree to obey God in exchange for His blessing. Because of this commitment, throughout the entire period of the Old Testament, God expects the Israelites to be faithful to the Law, and He punishes them when they aren't.

However, even though the old covenant was central to the existence of God's people for 1500 years, it was never intended to be permanent. We learn this from the pen of the prophet Jeremiah in Jeremiah 31:31-32. Jeremiah wrote this at a time when God's people were almost completely apostate. The nation of Israel had already been carried into captivity, and the nation of Judah was going to follow them shortly, all because they had forsaken God for the worship of idols. In fact, God regards His people as having broken the covenant that they made with Him. However, even in this gloomy time, there was still hope. God was going to make a new covenant with His people that was even better than the first one. As Jeremiah continues on to say here, under the new covenant, God would dwell with His children, and He would offer them forgiveness for their sins in a way they had never experienced before. As a consequence of this new covenant, the old covenant would be rendered obsolete and displaced. That was always God's plan for it.

In fact, one of the great themes of the New Testament is the establishment of **THE NEW COVENANT**. We learn when the switch between old and new took place from Colossians 2:13-14. The death of Jesus on the cross accomplished many things, but one of the most important things it did was put to death the Law that Moses received. This Old Law demanded perfect obedience from the people, and because no one but Jesus ever obeyed it perfectly, it condemned everyone else. That's why Paul calls it the handwriting of requirements that was hostile to us. The Law of Moses could never give life. It could only kill. Thankfully, though, Christ took this hostile law and had it nailed to the cross with Him. When Christ died, the Law died too, and thereafter, it no longer had any legal force.

This is why Paul says what he does in Galatians 3:24-25. First of all, notice that he makes clear that the Law wasn't useless. It served the function that God wanted it to serve. It brought the nation of Israel to the point where Jesus could come to earth and die, and in His death, He justified the faithful people who lived under the Law too. However, once mankind was brought to Christ and could believe in His gospel, the Law of Moses had fulfilled its purpose. From that point on, no one was subject to the requirements of that Law anymore. We are bound by the law of Christ instead.

Now, that's an awful lot of abstract doctrine, but it has a very important point. Most people today, even most believers, don't know that the Law of Moses was nailed to the cross with Christ and abolished. As a result, they often turn to the Old Testament and the laws that it contains and say that we need to obey those laws today, or they will say that because the Israelites did something in the Old Testament, that we have authority to do it today too. Not so. Those commandments are not bound on us, but neither do we have the right to use them to justify our conduct. Unless some part of the Old Testament is repeated in the New Testament, it has been done away with. We are freed from it, but just

as was true of the Israelites and their covenant, God expects us to obey the laws of our covenant in the New Testament. This changes the way we understand all kinds of important topics, from our worship to our giving to the work.

The Silence of the Scripture.

Just as it is important for us to grasp the difference between the covenants, we also must understand the silence of the Scripture. The Bible is a relatively compact book. It does not define our conduct in microscopic detail. In many places in Scripture, God will give us a command, for instance, the command to sing. Along with that positive command, though, God does not necessarily include a whole list of negative commands. For example, we are never commanded NOT to use musical instruments, spiritual dancing, or humming in our worship. The Scripture is silent on those subjects.

The question, then, is what we are to do with that silence. Is the silence permissive, so that we can do anything we want that is not expressly forbidden, or is the silence restrictive, so that we must confine ourselves to doing what is positively commanded? We see an excellent example of restrictive silence in the original U.S. Constitution. When the Constitution was originally written, its framers envisioned a federal government with limited, enumerated powers. They didn't go through and say, "The federal government can't do this, and it can't do this, and it can't do this." Instead, they listed the things that the federal government COULD do, and anything that wasn't on the list was assumed to be beyond the federal government's powers. If you have any questions about this, Matt Sterba will be happy to answer them for you.

In just the same way, regardless of covenant, God has always intended His silence to be restrictive, and our powers to act in His name to be limited. This is perhaps most obvious from what God did in the time of the Old Law to people who took His silence to be permissive. We find one such object lesson in the story of **NADAB AND ABIHU**. This begins with the simple and mundane command of Exodus 30:1. God wanted the Israelites to make an altar of incense, and He wanted them to burn incense on it. Nowhere in this text, nor in any other, does God ever say, "Don't burn incense anywhere else." The Scripture was silent on that subject. If silence was permissive, then the Israelites could burn incense wherever they wanted and God would be OK with it. If not, only incense on the altar would be acceptable.

Sadly for them, Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron the high priest, decided that God's silence was permissive. We see what happened in Leviticus 10:1-2. They offered incense from their censers, rather than from the altar of incense. God considered that strange fire which He had not commanded, and He sent down fire from heaven, which killed them for their presumption. When God said, "Use the altar of incense," He meant ONLY use the altar of incense. His silence was restrictive, and Nadab and Abihu died because of their failure to grasp that point.

We see another illustration of the restrictive nature of God's silence in the tragic tale of **UZZA AND THE ARK**. Once again, this story begins with a command, given in Exodus 25:13-14. According to God's command, the Israelites built a container for the holiest relics of their faith called the ark of the covenant. It was basically a big gold-covered box. God decreed that this box should have metal rings on the side, so that the Israelites could insert poles into the rings and carry the ark. In other passages, God gave the Levites the task of carrying the ark. Once again, the Scripture was silent about any other possible modes of transportation. Did this mean that the Israelites could do whatever they wanted with it, or were they restricted to carrying the ark with poles according to the explicit command?

We learn the answer from 2 Samuel 6:3, 6-7. Here, David is attempting to bring the ark back to Jerusalem. Rather than carrying the ark with poles, David decided to put the ark on a new cart. There's no evidence that David did this as a way to stick his tongue out at God. There's no evidence that Uzza had any ill intention when he put his hand on the ark to keep it from tipping over. Everyone involved seems to have had no other goal than to please God and to advance His worship. Nonetheless, Uzza enraged God by his action, and he was struck dead for touching the ark.

Now, this example might not seem as clear as the other. We might think that the problem was just that Uzza touched the ark, not that they'd put the ark on a cart instead of carrying it with poles. However, David himself knew better, and we see that from his words in 1 Chronicles 15:12-13. This passage describes the beginning of David's second attempt to transport the ark to Jerusalem, and it's evident from his words here that since the first attempt, he's been studying the Law. He now knows that the ark is to be carried by the sons of Levi on poles, so he summons the heads of the Levite households and tells them to do it. Even more tellingly, he reveals why Uzza died. It wasn't just because Uzza touched the ark. It was because their entire plan for getting the ark to Jerusalem was flawed. They never turned to the word to learn what they should do. The Scripture never forbade transporting the ark by cart, but God's silence didn't permit them to do what they wanted. They had to restrict themselves to His plan or suffer the consequences.

Today, we live 3500 years after the day of Nadab and Abihu, and 3000 after the lives of David and Uzza. However, God's nature does not change, and there's no evidence anywhere in Scripture that His silence means anything different today than it meant them. He does not permit us to do whatever we want in His name either. Instead, His silence restricts us. We can only do what He has commanded, and we cannot venture beyond that into what He has not commanded. This limited understanding of authority has not been popular with those who claim to be believers. Almost any church we name takes the silence of Scripture to be permissive. However, if we wish to please God, we cannot.