

Sermon Prep

Lesson 5

The Importance of Context

INTRO

Sermon Prep is a video series designed to help us become better students of the Bible and better communicators in the pulpit

In this session we will discuss the difference between projecting our thoughts into a passage and drawing meaning from a passage

To do so we are going to discuss context

Illustration

Several years ago the Mormon church ran a series of TV commercials to promote their church.

One of these advertisements showed an open bible with most of the words blurred out except for a portion of 1 verse from John 10 where Jesus promised that He had sheep that were part of another fold.

The commercial went on to suggest that this promise was fulfilled by the Mormon church

This is a classic example of what some call “Windowing Scripture” OR interpreting a passage of scripture without regard to its context.

HOWEVER, If we avoid the context of a passage we will neglect to understand the authors intent and we can make a passage mean whatever we want it to mean.

It is important to remember that it is the author, not the reader who determines there meaning of a passage

We can avoid missing the authors intent by carefully observing context

Literary Context

Think of a dartboard

It has a bullseye and a series of concentric circles

The bullseye represents the passage we are reading and the concentric circles represent context

FIRST

To best understand the passage we begin by looking at the immediate context OR the verses surrounding our text

- Illustration

Matthew 16:28

Jesus Transfigured on the Mount

Assuredly, I say to you, there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom.”

This verse rattled me as a new believer because I knew that all those standing with Jesus had long since died and He had not yet returned

But when I kept reading I discovered that the promise was fulfilled in the transfiguration

Matthew 17:1-2

Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, led them up on a high mountain by themselves; and He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light.

SECOND

After looking at the immediate context we broaden our search

We might start by looking at the subject matter of the text and research what else the Bible says about the subject

For Example

Philippians 2:12

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling;

Here Paul speaks of “Working out salvation”

This phrase is best understood looking at what else the NT writers had to say about the subject

Titus 3:5

not by **works** of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He **saved** us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit,

AND in Ephesians 2:8-10 where Paul explains the relationship between Faith and Works in regard to salvation

“For by **grace** you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, **not** of **works**, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for **good works**, which God prepared beforehand that we should **walk in** them.”

Biblical doctrines can only be forged by looking at everything the Bible says about a given subject

THIRD

We could broaden our search further by looking beyond the text itself and into the book of Scripture in which the passage is found

Two things to keep in mind

- **ONE - Style of writing**

We saw in lesson 1 that the bible is a single book because of its central theme BUT that it is made up of many books written by many different authors.

These authors wrote with a variety of different styles or genres

- Narrative
- Didactic
- Parabolic
- Poetic
- Prophetic

The tools we are providing will help us regardless of the genre but recognizing the style of writing will help with interpreting the passage accurately

For example

Parabolic, prophetic and poetic passages use a lot of figurative language

- Jesus is a door or a vine or even an unjust judge
- The kingdom of heaven is leaven, a woman who lost a coin or a farmer sowing seed

It is important to distinguish between literal and figurative

- **TWO**

Proper interpretation will come when we are aware of the testament in which a passage is found

Over half of the Bible was written to people living under a totally different covenant than the believer lives under today

These passages must be interpreted in light of that

For Example

Moses and Israel received a promise regarding their health

Exodus 15:26

and said, “If you diligently heed the voice of the Lord your God and do what is right in His sight, give ear to His commandments and keep all His statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you which I have brought on the Egyptians. For I am the Lord who heals you.”

HOWEVER

Since this promise was given specifically to Israel under the Old Covenant it would be wrong for a believer today to claim this promise as his own

HOWEVER

We should also recognize the theological principles found in the promise including the truth that God does give promises to us and that the blessings of God are associated with obedience to His word

HISTORIC CONTEXT

While literary context is the key to proper interpretation, understanding things about the historical, geographical or cultural situation of a passage will provide us with much greater insight into the meaning of a text

For time sake I will provide a resource and a warning

- RESOURCE

Halley's Bible Handbook

- WARNING

Check your sources carefully

This is especially true when it comes to historical examples and cultural issues.

PERSONAL CONTEXT

It is important to realize that we are not neutral or objective by nature.

When we approach a passage of we need to be aware that we bring certain things into the text with us

- Personal experience
- Theological bias
- And familiarity to the text

These have the ability to cloud our understanding of a text

Reading a passage within its context can help to clear the fog not only around the verse itself but around some of our unbalanced theological positions

Examples of personal context

- Experience

If a person has not had a father figure or had an abusive or negligent one it may be difficult for them to grasp the concept of the fatherhood of God

Allowing Scripture to speak for itself will help us develop a biblical concept of God as a father and fatherhood in general

- Theological Bias

When I first began to develop a hunger for the Word of God I was introduced to books that would enhance my personal study of the Bible.

The rule of thumb at the time was that for a Bible commentator to be worth reading they must be dead.

As a result we were introduced to many of the British writers from the Victorian era who were for the most part reformed in their theology.

As a result I brought a reformed theology with me into every text I read. It took some time to allow the text to speak rather than to simply look within a passage for proof texts for a predetermined position.

- Familiarity

A student sitting next to Albert Einstein turned to him and asked, "What do you do?" Einstein replied, "I am a student of physics. What do you do?" "Oh," the student answered, "I finished studying physics last year."

One of the things that will limit our understanding of a text is when we bring all the former lessons we have heard on the subject into the text.

It is a good idea to do our best to look at a text with fresh eyes.