

“Have You Understood All These Things?”

In the name of him in whom nothing can separate us from the love of God, dear friends in Christ: In today's Gospel reading, Jesus sets forth three short parables: the Treasure in the Field, the Pearl of Great Price, and the Net and the Fish. These three brief word pictures come at the tail end of a whole series of other parables, some of which Jesus unpacks and explains for his disciples, as he does for the Parable of the Sower and the Parable of the Weeds and the Wheat, and several more that Jesus does not explain, like the parables of the Mustard Seed and the Yeast in the Dough. He also doesn't bother to explain (as you may have noticed) two of the three parables that we heard this morning. Anyway, after speaking all these parables, Jesus looks into the vacant faces of his disciples and asks, "Have you understood all these things?" And they all smile and nod their heads saying, "Of course, Jesus. Sure. Yes. We understand."

But *did* they? I don't think so. I mean, even a cursory glance through the four Gospels will lead you to the inescapable conclusion that the disciples failed to understand what Jesus was talking about *most* of the time – *even when he was speaking to them clearly*. What made them think that they understood him when he spoke in parables? And don't imagine that the problem has improved over time. If the original disciples, the men handpicked by Jesus and who studied under him personally for three years were subject to misunderstanding him, how much more susceptible to getting it wrong are his disciples today who are 2000 years removed from the source? Not only are we that far removed from the source, but we've also got 2000 years worth of clutter, commentary, and scholarly tradition glomming on to the source material further adding to the confusion, which is why on any given Sunday you could walk into ten different churches and listen to ten different and wildly diverging explanations of the very same text – and each and every one of the preachers insisting that they understand perfectly what Jesus is talking about. Obviously if they're all saying different and even contradictory things, they can't all be right. They can't all have understood "all these things".

Which raises the question: Have *you* understood all these things? *Have I*, the guy standing here for the purpose of explaining to you what Jesus meant, have I understood these things? And how would you know? Knowing as we do that the net of the church embraces all kinds of fish, the good and the bad, and not wanting to be one of those bad fish that gets thrown into the fiery furnace where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth (*that* part I'm sure we all understand only too well), I think you'll agree that it matters immensely whether or not we understand what Jesus taught. And so with that in mind, what I propose to do this morning is give you a little primer on biblical interpretation. Let's consider the basic guidelines we use to ensure that we do indeed understand the words of Jesus. In the process we will discover why and how others come to different (that is, *mistaken*) understandings of the same Bible passages.

We begin with the Bible itself. What is it? The Bible attests that it is the divinely inspired, infallible Word of God. It's God's revelation of himself, his will, and his truth to mankind. And it's a complete revelation. It is not to be added to or subtracted from. As such it is the sole source of authority and truth for understanding things that pertain to

God. Therefore, whenever we set out to interpret a passage, we must approach it with the respect that it is due. Recognizing that it is God's Word means that it's above us. It directs and enlightens us – not the other way around. We're not free to change or manipulate it according to our reason or personal preferences. That's the way we understand it.

And so, you can see right away that when considering a passage of the Bible the chances are high that we will interpret it quite differently than others who hold a lower view of the Scriptures. For example, most mainline Christian denominations see the Bible as a very fallible collection of human writings. Oh sure, they might *contain* God's truth. The Lord may have had some hand in it all; but it's up to us to divide the wheat from the chaff and separate the fact from the fiction. People who approach the Scriptures this way are less likely to ask, "What did Jesus really mean?" than they are to ask, "What did Jesus really say?" They take it for granted that the statements of Jesus recorded in the Bible may not have actually been spoken by him. So, when they come across a statement they don't like or that doesn't fit their predetermined agenda, presto! It's ruled to be inauthentic. Jesus didn't say it – so who cares what it means?

Others see the Bible as an open-ended document. It was okay for its day; but the Lord has a lot more to say to his church. Expressing this idea, one church body has as its slogan, "Don't put a period where God placed a comma." And just to illustrate where this sort of thinking leads, a little over a week ago I heard an interview with Bishop Gene Robinson of the Episcopal Church USA – which isn't the church body with the slogan, but it is one in which the same idea is prevalent. If you're not familiar with the name, Bishop Robinson has been in the news a lot lately because he is the first actively gay bishop in the worldwide Anglican Communion of churches. Not surprisingly, many of his fellow bishops, primarily those from India, Africa, South America, and Australia who as a group are quite a bit more conservative than their American and British counterparts, have a bit of a problem with him. The Anglican bishops were in England for their once every ten years meeting called the Lambeth conference. Bishop Robinson was politely asked not to attend because those in charge were hoping to avoid a messy confrontation and the possible break up of their church body. They asked him to maintain a low profile, so they could smooth things over and get on with business. So, Bishop Robinson did not attend the conference; but his idea of maintaining a low profile was to fly to England and, in a cathedral just down the street from where the bishops were meeting, and before the rolling cameras of the news media, he had himself "married" to his long-time gay partner. Anyway, in one of the interviews he gave following the event, I heard him very slickly explain that the Holy Spirit keeps talking to the church apart from the Scriptures and indeed, often in flat contradiction to the Scriptures; and if only we are sensitive to the Spirit's voice, he will lead us to many more brand new revelations of divine truth.

So hopefully we see the primary importance of maintaining a very high view of the Bible as the *sole* source of truth and authority for the people of God. Any one or any church body that loses that perspective is like a ship without an anchor. It's going to drift every which way in the winds of fads, the currents of culture, and the tides of popular opinion. The will and whim of sinful man will be guiding the ship, not the Word of God. And that can only lead to shipwreck and ruin.

All right then, so we want to approach the Bible the right way. We're going to take for granted that it is God's Word and that it is true and authoritative. And sadly, it's

not an exaggeration for me to say that if you agree that this is the way to go at it, you are more qualified to teach theology than the learned doctors and professors at most of this nation's seminaries. And if things aren't working out with whatever it is you do, you might consider a career change. Be that as it may, even approaching the Scriptures in this correct way, when we come to any particular passage, we're still left asking the question, "What does this mean?" Fortunately, most of the time it's pretty obvious. If you read that Jesus Christ suffered for our sin, died, and rose again on the third day, or that Joshua fought the battle of Jericho and the walls came a tumblin' down, well, that's what happened. Simple, right? Other times though, it's not so obvious. I mean, the words may be clear enough but it's not immediately clear how they are intended to be understood and applied to our lives. And for these times you've got to ask yourself, "Is the passage Law or is it Gospel?" If it's Law, then it's telling me something that God requires of me; like, "Thou shalt not steal" or "Be holy, for I the Lord thy God am holy." If it's Gospel, then the passage is telling me something that God has done, or is doing, or will do for me; like "God created the heaven and the earth" or "In the fullness of time God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law" or "[nothing] in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." These are all Gospel statements.

But now let's consider the parable of the Treasure in the Field that we heard this morning. In this parable Jesus likens the Kingdom of God to a man who finds a buried treasure. Upon discovering it, he buries it up to hide it again, and then goes and sells all he has so that he can buy the field. That's it. We understand the words just fine; but what do they mean for you and me? Who is the man? What is the treasure he finds? Okay, if the story is essentially Law then it's telling you what you have to do. So, in that case, you're the man. The treasure is the Kingdom of God, or if you prefer: eternal salvation. The point of the parable is that you've got to search for it; and once you find it, you must go give up everything you have in order to possess it. That's it. And I have to tell you that in probably ninety-five percent of the churches in which the Word of God is taken seriously (like we do), that's precisely how the parable will be interpreted. And so, pastors teaching on this text will admonish their people to strive to attain the Kingdom through great sacrifice and personal cost.

All right, now let's consider what happens if we understand the parable as Gospel. Well, then the active agent would be God. He'd be the man. The field would be the world then. And the hidden treasure ... why, that would be you and me – the church. And then he, the Lord, goes and gives all that he has, all that he values ... say, like his only begotten Son in order to buy the field and possess the treasure. Now, I kind of like that interpretation; and if I were to preach on this text (as I suppose I'm doing), that's the way I'd be inclined to present it. But my preference for a Gospel spin on the parable doesn't necessarily make it right. The question remains, "Which is correct? How did Jesus intend that the parable be understood: as Law or Gospel?"

And to answer the question let me give you a few more of the general guiding principles we use to interpret the Bible. The first of these is what we might call Christocentric principle. Think of it as the main theme of the Bible. The Apostle John wrote that Jesus did many things that are not recorded in the Scripture, but the things that are written, he said, were written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. God's goal in giving us his Word is to reveal himself in the person of Jesus Christ and to reveal his love for us in giving up his Son as the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world. Therefore, one way

or another everything that's written in the Scripture supports that goal. One way or another, the point of every story is Jesus Christ and the life we have in him.

A second principle of biblical interpretation is that of *divine monergism*. There's a ten-dollar theological term for you. It comes from two Greek words: mono, which means one or only or alone; and ergos, which means work. And so *divine monergism* means that God alone does the work. If something good or positive is happening, you can bet that the Lord is making it happen. We heard this principle being laid out in today's Epistle reading. There we heard that God is at work in all things to do good for his chosen people. For those he foreknew he predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son. Those he predestined, he called; that is, he sent his Word to them so that they could hear it. Those he called, he justified; that is, he brought them to faith in the Savior, Jesus Christ. And those he justified, he also glorified; which means that from his point of view it's already a done deal. You are as good as in heaven with him right now. It's *that* certain. And it's *that* certain because *he's* doing it all. You are simply the beneficiary of all the wonderful things God is doing for you.

All right, one more principle of biblical interpretation I'd like you to have in your toolbox is that of the consistency of Scripture. The basic idea is this: though the Lord God used many different men to write the Bible over a period of some 1600 years, the same Holy Spirit was inspiring them to write what they did. So, while there were many writers there is really only one Author behind them all. Therefore, we expect the whole thing to hang together. We're not going to find contradictions. Instead we're going to find that there is a general agreement in the storyline, and that figures and images used in one place will mean pretty much the same things when they appear in other places – unless we're specifically told they are being used differently (which can sometimes happen). So, with this principle in mind, in the parable of the Treasure Hidden in the Field (which Jesus does not explain), we're left wondering what he intends the treasure to stand for. One way to figure it out would be to search the Scripture for other uses of the word treasure—and oh, look! In today's Old Testament lesson, we hear the Lord calling his people his treasured possession; so treasured, in fact, that he redeemed them from the house of slavery.

So now, returning to the question of whether we should go with a Law or Gospel spin on the parable (and the difference in meaning is huge), we apply these three principles and ask which of the interpretations of the parable best fits? Which one emphasizes Jesus Christ and his atoning work on the cross, *and* stresses divine monergism (that is, God doing all the work), *and* is also consistent with other Bible passages? Obviously, it's the Gospel interpretation. And that's good for you and me because if the Law interpretation turned out to be correct, we'd always be left wondering and worrying that maybe we hadn't given up everything or enough to buy the field with its treasure. Our salvation would always be in doubt. But thanks be to God that through the infinitely high cost of the death of his Son, God our Father bought the field – and us with it. And he redeemed us from our slavery to sin that he may be his treasured possession forever.

See? Isn't biblical interpretation fun? Sure it is – especially when by God's grace and the illumination of his Spirit we understand all these things. In Jesus name and to his glory. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!