He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

Lesson 5 The Complexity of Meaning

Manuscript

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INTRODUCTION

There's an old adage that comes up frequently in discussions of biblical hermeneutics. It goes something like this, "There is one meaning, but there are many applications of that meaning." For example, the Bible gives us a simple, straightforward instruction like, "Love your neighbor." But we must apply this instruction to our lives in many different ways as we deal with different neighbors in different circumstances.

Now, as helpful as this insight may be, when it comes to interpreting the Scriptures, we need to acknowledge that the meaning of every biblical passage is complex or multifaceted. So, rather than saying, "There's one meaning but many applications," it's much more helpful to say something like this: "There is one meaning, but, there are many partial summaries of that one meaning. And there are many more applications." The one meaning of every biblical passage is so complex that we should learn how to summarize it in many different ways, and then apply it to our lives.

This is the fifth lesson in our series *He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation*. We've entitled this lesson "The Complexity of Meaning" because we'll be exploring the ways in which Christians throughout the ages have attributed different types and numbers of meaning to biblical passages.

Our discussion of the complexity of meaning in the Bible will divide into two parts. First, we'll look at what interpreters have often called the "literal sense" of Scripture. And second, we'll focus on the full value of a text, which extends beyond the literal sense in a variety of ways. Let's turn first to the literal sense of Scripture.

LITERAL SENSE

The term "literal sense," sometimes called by the Latin expression *sensus literalis*, is often confused in our day with the term "literal interpretation." "Literal interpretation" refers to wooden or mechanical approaches to understanding the Bible. But historically, the term "literal sense" has always meant something much more akin to what modern evangelicals have called the "original meaning" or the "grammatico-historical meaning" of a passage.

The literal sense takes the words and phrases of Scripture according to the intentions of the author and the historical contexts of their original audiences.
It pays attention to the different genres in Scripture. It acknowledges figures of speech like metaphors, similes, analogies, and hyperbole — to name just a few. It takes history as history, poetry as poetry, proverbs as proverbs, and so on.

> **There are a number of different genres of biblical books, and it's important to understand the differences in those genres in order that we can understand them and interpret them appropriately. We don't understand all genres to be doing quite the same thing in quite the same way. And so by understanding and paying attention to the genre of the biblical books, we allow the books themselves to set the agenda for how we are to interpret those books.**
>
> **— Dr. Brandon Crowe**

When we see that the literal sense of a biblical passage includes much more than the mere words written on the page, we begin to become aware of how complicated the *sensus literalis* of every passage can be. The intentions of authors are multifaceted. Genre considerations complicate the meaning of a passage. Figures of speech and the like also introduce a host of considerations. These factors reveal the manifold intricacies of the original meaning of every biblical passage. And these complexities have led many well-meaning Christians to approach the meaning of Scripture in different ways.

Throughout history, Christians have nearly unanimously affirmed the need to find the literal sense or original meaning of biblical texts. But there have also been other voices arguing that Scripture's meaning is so complex that it can't be sufficiently summarized under the heading of the literal sense. So, in this part of our lesson, we'll explore the history of the term "literal sense," in order to see how the literal sense, properly understood, can help us investigate and describe Scripture's complex meaning.

We'll look at two major ways the complexity of meaning in Scripture has been associated with its literal sense. First, we'll see that some followers of Christ have said that the literal sense is only one of Scripture's multiple meanings. And second, we'll focus on the idea that the literal sense is the singular meaning of the Bible. Let's look first at the belief that the literal sense is only one of Scripture's multiple meanings.

Multiple Meanings

In the early church, the idea that Scripture has multiple meanings largely resulted from allegorical approaches to hermeneutics. An allegorical approach is one that interprets the historical people, places, things and events described in Scripture as if they were symbols or metaphors for spiritual truths. A tree might represent a kingdom, a war might represent an internal struggle with sin, and so on. In allegorical interpretations, the physical realities described in the Bible are often downplayed, and can even be dismissed as unimportant or untrue. And the spiritual ideas represented by these physical realities tend to be treated as the more important matters of Scripture.

Christian allegorical approaches are sometimes traced to the Jewish scholar Philo of Alexandria, who lived from around 20 B.C. to perhaps A.D. 50. Philo laid the foundation for Christian allegorical methods by viewing the Hebrew Scriptures as allegories that revealed higher spiritual truths.

After Philo, during the early centuries of the church, leading Christian scholars took a similar approach to interpreting both the Old and the New Testament of the Bible. This was especially true in Alexandria's Catechetical School, which taught theology and interpretation of the Bible to theological students.

One of the more famous teachers at the Catechetical School was Origen, who lived from A.D. 185 to approximately A.D. 254. Origen divided the meaning of Scripture into two categories: the literal sense and the spiritual sense. Drawing from Paul's distinction between the letter and the Spirit of the Law in 2 Corinthians 3:6, Origen said that every passage of Scripture has two main types of meaning: the letter of the text and spirit of the text. By "letter," Origen meant the plain meaning of the words in their grammatical context. And by the "spirit" of a text, he meant the figurative senses — meanings that went beyond the plain sense of the words themselves. Origen tended to equate the letter of the text with its literal meaning, and he defended the authority of the literal meaning. But in addition to this, Origen argued that mature, spiritual believers should look beyond the literal meaning to find the spiritual sense of Scripture.

For example, in his work *On First Principles*, book 4, chapter 1, section 16, Origen argued that the creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2 were contrary to reason, and therefore that Christians should ignore their literal sense and look for deeper spiritual meanings. Not surprisingly, Origen's allegorical methods have been criticized many times throughout history. But his approach still had significant influence on the direction of early Christian hermeneutics.

> **Some ancient interpreters like John Chrysostom had some brilliant insights on biblical narratives like the book of Acts, and he tended to read them more literally. The way we normally read narratives, we try to hear what the narrative is saying and we try to draw lessons or morals from the narrative. You have other interpreters like Origen who tended to allegorize, turn them into a series of symbols, and the danger of that methodology is it's not really the way the Bible was written for us to grasp it that way. You have that method actually being derived from Greek philosophers who were trying to explain away the old myths, the embarrassing things in the old myths, and sometimes the approach to the Bible in that method borders on that. They're no longer trying to hear what the text itself said. They're trying to make it more inspired, in a sense, by reading something else into it. At the same time, even Origen sometimes has some really good insights.**
>
> **— Dr. Craig S. Keener**

Origen's propensity toward spiritual or allegorical approaches to the Bible reflected the influence of Neo-Platonism on the early church. In this view, the Scriptures came from God who was pure celestial spirit. And as a result, it was assumed that the Scriptures didn't actually teach about the material world. Matter was, by its very nature, evil. So, when the Scriptures referred to physical things that took place in history, they actually pointed to heavenly, spiritual truths that could be discerned by allegory. The true

meaning of Scripture, in this view, was in these greater spiritual truths, and discerning these truths was the highest goal of biblical interpretation.

Sadly, many Christian theologians embraced these notions. And as they did, they encountered serious problems with the Bible's accounts of the material world. The Old Testament focuses on things like: the creation of the universe, earthly blessings in the lives of God's people, Israel's physical deliverance from slavery in Egypt, and the establishing of an earthly kingdom for God's people in the Promised Land. And the New Testament focuses on physical events in Jesus' life and the lives of the apostles. For Christians influenced by Neo-Platonism, the physical aspects of these histories were problematic because they portrayed the material world as God's good creation. So, they appealed to the schools of allegorical interpretation as a means to reconcile the Bible and Neo-platonic philosophy. Their hermeneutical approaches downplayed the physical realities recorded in the Bible, and encouraged Christians to look for the deeper spiritual truths they were intended to teach.

The spiritual sense of Scripture was explored and categorized in a number of different ways. One influential approach was known as the *Quadriga* — a Latin term for a Roman chariot drawn by four-horses. The image of a quadriga was applied to Scripture to indicate that the Scriptures were harnessed to four distinct meanings.

John Cassian, who lived from approximately A.D. 360 to 435, described this approach in some detail in his work *Conferences*, conference 14, chapter 8. Cassian followed Origen's basic distinction between the literal and spiritual senses. But he went beyond this by identifying three kinds of spiritual meanings: the allegorical sense, which was the doctrinal teaching of a passage; the tropological sense, which was the moral teaching of a passage; and the anagogical sense, which was the passage's teaching about heaven and eschatological salvation.

For example, according to the *Quadriga*, when a biblical passage mentions "Jerusalem," the reference may be understood in four ways. In its literal sense it's the ancient capital of Israel. In its allegorical sense, it refers to the Christian doctrine of the church. In its tropological sense, Jerusalem might be either a faithful believer or the moral qualities of the human soul. And in its anagogical sense, it could be the heavenly city described in the book of Revelation.

Now, it's important to note that throughout the centuries biblical interpreters debated just how closely the spiritual meanings of a biblical passage should be tied to its literal meaning. Some argued that all meanings were vitally connected to the literal meaning, but others said that each sense of the text was independent of the others. And they appealed to hidden spiritual meanings that had nothing to do with the literal sense.

As just one example, the influential French theologian Bernard of Clairvaux, who lived from 1090 to 1153, promoted some extremely imaginative interpretations of Scripture that divorced its spiritual senses from its literal sense. For instance, his interpretation of the Song of Solomon was completely unrelated to the literal sense of the text. Listen to these words from the Song of Solomon 1:17:

> The beams of our house are cedars; our rafters are firs (Song of Solomon 1:17).

When we read this passage in its historical context, it isn't difficult to see that it was a description of Solomon's actual palace. It exalted the king by calling attention to the wonder of his royal dwelling.

But Bernard of Clairvaux didn't allow the literal, grammatico-historical sense of this verse to govern his interpretation. From his point of view, this passage actually symbolized spiritual realities. The house itself represented the people of God. And the beams and rafters of the house corresponded to church authorities. He went on to say that this verse taught how the church and state were to operate alongside each other as well. The spiritual meanings Bernard thought he found in this passage didn't emerge from, or even coordinate with, its literal sense.

> **Martin Luther, in his lectures on Genesis, he talks about this allegorical style of interpretation — and by allegorical I mean not the author's intended allegory but taking a text and allegorizing it in a way that the author did not intend. And he says that in his youth, in his younger years, Luther says I was pretty good at this, too, and I received a lot of applause for it. But this is not faithful to the Scripture. Calvin also speaks of this allegorization and says it's like putting a wax nose on Scripture and you can just turn it whichever way the interpreter wants rather than being faithful to the author… However, I do think there is value in reading the church fathers, and Luther obviously read them, too, even as he criticized them. We learn from them, even as they often illegitimately took true doctrines and put them on texts that weren't saying that, we understand what they were trying to do. They were trying to understand how to interpret the Old Testament and make it relevant for Christians, even as they, we would say, I think often sometimes went astray in that. So we can learn about how they interpreted Scripture. And there are also many faithful examples of interpretation throughout church history that we can learn from.**
>
> **— Dr. Robert L. Plummer**

The idea that Scripture has multiple meanings has gained wide acceptance in the contemporary world too but mostly for different reasons. Instead of arguing that God designed Scripture to communicate on multiple levels, many modern interpreters believe that the Bible's multiple meanings result from the inherent ambiguities of language itself. They argue that language is so ambiguous that it can never have a single precise meaning. And because of this, the best we can do is to determine some vague limits or boundaries of a biblical passage's meaning. But in this view, these multiple meanings of the Bible cannot be verified and they must simply be accepted as one person decides it means this and another person decides it means that.

Now that we've seen that many Christians have believed the literal sense of Scripture to be just one of its multiple meanings, let's consider the idea that the literal sense is the singular meaning of Scripture.

SINGULAR MEANING

The famous theologian Thomas Aquinas, who lived from around 1225 to 1274, championed a much more responsible approach to the *Quadriga*. Unlike many of his predecessors and contemporaries, he insisted that the literal sense of Scripture was foundational to all its other senses. For instance, in his *Summa Theologica*, part 1, question 1, article 10, he insisted that every legitimate spiritual interpretation was rooted in the literal sense of a passage. He also taught that nothing necessary to faith was communicated as a spiritual meaning without being taught elsewhere in Scripture in the literal sense. Not all scholars would agree that Aquinas always followed these principles as he interpreted the Scriptures. But nevertheless, he insisted in principle that every sense of a passage of Scripture must be tied to its literal meaning.

Although Aquinas' efforts to anchor spiritual meanings in the literal meaning of the Bible may seem like common sense to most of us, his point of view wasn't adopted by everyone. Spiritual interpretations that were disconnected from the literal meaning of passages had been used to support many doctrines of the medieval church. And church authorities asserted that they had special God-given insights into spiritual meanings that had no connection to the literal meaning of the Bible.

But the Renaissance in Europe during the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries set the stage for a dramatic shift in the interpretation of Scripture. In brief, Renaissance scholars began to study classical literary, philosophical, and religious texts in their original languages. As they did, they also interpreted these texts apart from the authority of the church by highlighting the literal, historical sense of these texts. And it wasn't long before this approach was also applied to the Scriptures. This strategy of interpretation equated the literal sense with what we've called the original meaning of biblical passages. And it emphasized the centrality and authority of this literal, original meaning.

> **Well, in the medieval church, most believers affirmed that God's full intent in Scripture was known through a fourfold approach: The moral following the literal, the anagogical, and the allegorical. So the Reformers of the sixteenth century — called Protestants by most of us — objected to this, part in theory but especially because of what came out of that, which was a tradition of teaching that they felt was, in some cases, a corruption of Scripture, or it obscured the original intent or authorial intent of Scripture, in favor of church authority.**
>
> **— Dr. James D. Smith III**

> **The *Quadriga*, or the fourfold sense of Scripture, has a long and ancient history and tradition within the Christian church… So, and the Reformed fathers were pushed on this by some of their Catholic counterparts during the time of the Reformation, because the**

> **Reformers were insisting that there's only one sense or meaning to Scripture. But in response, people like William Whittaker, for example, said we don't reject the *Quadriga*, the sense that there's four senses to Scripture; we do reject the idea that there's four meanings or senses to Scripture. There's just one, and it's the historical, the literal, the grammatical. But the other three are collections or what we might today think of as applications, something along those lines. The idea is that they're grounded in that one sense, but they are the proper sorts of lines to think about how that one sense applies to us as readers of the Bible today. And so, it wasn't a complete rejection of the *Quadriga* so much as a reformation of it, a reworking of it, so that there's the one sense now with these various three lines of application along the lines of faith, hope and love.**
>
> **— Dr. Bruce Baugus**

During the Renaissance, Protestants continued to develop the ideas that had been championed by Aquinas. But they didn't argue that all spiritual meanings are merely grounded in the literal meaning of Scripture. Instead, they said that all the spiritual aspects of a text that were intended by the author for his original audience are actually aspects of its literal sense. They believed that Scripture's literal sense, or original meaning, is both singular and complex. We might say that Renaissance Protestants broadened the concept of the term "literal" so that it included everything the author intended the "literature" of Scripture to convey. As a result, leading figures like Ulrich Zwingli, Martin Luther and John Calvin thought of the literal or original meaning as including everything that each biblical passage means. They saw the literal sense as a complex meaning that included historical, doctrinal, moral and eschatological aspects.

It can be helpful to illustrate the Protestant conception of the literal sense of Scripture by comparing it to a cut gemstone. Cut gemstones have multiple "facets" or "faces," just as there are many smaller senses that contribute to the literal sense of Scripture. Each passage of Scripture was intended by its author to communicate something about historical facts, doctrines, moral obligations, salvation and eschatology, and so on.

Moreover, each facet of a gemstone is a distinct surface that contributes to the beauty of the whole, and no single facet can claim to be the entire stone. In a similar way, biblical passages have distinct aspects that contribute to the meaning of the literal sense, and none of these smaller aspects can claim to be the whole literal sense.

Put simply, the meaning of Scripture is multifaceted. Each passage's meaning has many smaller parts or aspects that contribute to the singular, unified meaning we've called its literal sense.

> **The Bible is a rich book. It's a deep book. It comes from the mind of God, and I would dare say the mind of God is pretty vast, and the ideas that are expressed are vast and they have many angles… And so, evaluating interpretations is simply a matter of sitting down and asking yourself, is this angle an appropriate way to read the text? …**

> **And so you just have to think through the options in terms of the potential for multiplicity and the appropriateness in the context of looking at things from a variety of angles in that way, and then be open to the possibility that meaning in fact is and can be complex. As a result, it actually enriches your interpretation because a passage can be doing more than perhaps the initial understanding, the initial impression I may have, and I can learn from someone else's reading of the text as a result.**
>
> **— Dr. Darrell L. Bock**

Every passage of Scripture of significant size has implications for many different aspects of theology and Christian living. So, it's easy to understand why many people throughout the history of the church have thought that biblical passages have multiple meanings. But the most responsible approach to the richness of the Scriptures is to ensure that everything we say about a biblical passage is tied to its grammar set within the historical context of the ancient world. And if we approach the Bible in this way, we'll be better prepared to discover the complex meaning that God and his inspired human authors intended to communicate to the original audiences of Scripture.

So far in our discussion of the complexity of meaning in Scripture, we've seen why Protestants strongly affirm the importance and scope of the Bible's literal sense. So at this point, we're ready to turn our attention to what we'll call the full value of scriptural passages.

FULL VALUE

From time to time, evangelicals use the expression *sensus plenior*, meaning the "full sense" of Scripture. While we affirm the importance of the literal sense or the original meaning of a biblical passage, we also realize that later portions of the Bible often refer to earlier portions of Scriptures in ways that do not simply repeat the literal or original sense. This is especially true when New Testament authors point out how the Old Testament is fulfilled in Christ. New Testament authors interpreted Old Testament passages correctly. They never contradicted their original meaning. But they did not simply confine themselves to the original meaning. Instead, they discerned a fuller sense, a *sensus plenior*, for these Old Testament passages. And so, along these lines, we will speak of the "full sense" or the "full value" of every biblical passage.

In this series, we'll define the full value of a biblical text as:

> **The total significance of a text, consisting of its original meaning, all its biblical elaborations, and all its legitimate applications**

The original meaning is the literal sense of Scripture, which is the most fundamental aspect of the text. Biblical elaborations are places where one part of

Scripture comments directly or indirectly on another part of Scripture. And legitimate applications are the implications that Scripture has for the lives of its readers.

In accordance with this definition of the Bible's full value, our discussion will divide into three parts. First, we'll focus on the concept of original meaning. Second, we'll discuss biblical elaborations. And third, we'll explore the legitimate applications of Scripture to our lives. Let's begin with original meaning.

ORIGINAL MEANING

In a previous lesson, we defined original meaning as:

> **The concepts, behaviors, and emotions that the divine and human writers jointly intended the document to communicate to its first audience.**

As we've said, the original meaning of a passage is equivalent to its literal sense. And as this definition shows, the original meaning is multifaceted. Scripture was supposed to communicate to its first audience on many levels. It communicates concepts, which are ideas the original audience should have been able to recognize in the text. It communicates behaviors, which are activities that were either performed or not performed in the text. And it communicates emotions, the attitudes and feelings that are either conveyed by or expressed in the text.

Let's illustrate how a text can communicate concepts, behaviors, and emotions by looking at Exodus 20:13, which states:

> You shall not murder (Exodus 20:13).

Let's think about this passage in terms of our definition of original meaning. What concepts, behaviors, and emotions did the divine and human writers jointly intend the commandment against murder to communicate to its first audience? Well, with regard to concepts, this verse explicitly communicates the idea that the wrongful taking of human life is forbidden. By implication, it communicates that human life is valuable to God. And the fact that it takes the form of a command implies that God is sovereign over human beings.

With regard to behaviors, this commandment is part of the record of God's historical actions — God himself engaged in the behavior of delivering this commandment to Moses, and Moses presented it to God's people. And this indicated that God wanted the people whom Moses led through the wilderness to the Promised Land — the original audience of the book of Exodus — not to engage in the behavior of murder.

And with regard to emotions, this passage teaches us that God hates murder, and that he is determined to uphold justice.

The original meaning of the commandment against murder was multifaceted, intended to communicate the explicit concepts, behaviors and emotions of God and Moses to its original audience, and also to teach them what God required of them

regarding their own concepts, behaviors, and emotions. And something similar is true of every biblical passage.

As a result, if we want to gain the full value of the text, we have to appreciate the complexities of original meaning. If we ignore these complexities, we'll miss a great deal of what Scripture has to teach us.

> **The Reformers developed two methods for interpreting the text: the grammatical and the historical. One the one hand, they ask what does the text say grammatically speaking? On the other hand, what did it say in its first setting? Those two answers to those questions provide parameters, as it were. Within those fences, a variety of interpretations are valid and legitimate, and that means that within those parameters we need to exercise humility as we say yes, it could be understood a different way. Now, if one of those interpretations is in fact grammatically impossible, we say no, that's wrong. Or if one is historically impossible — they couldn't have meant that in that setting — that is to be dismissed. But within those two parameters, a variety of interpretations is possible, and as I say, we need to exercise humility in regard to our own understanding.**
>
> **— Dr. John Oswalt**

> **Scripture can fairly be read in more than one way. Now, this doesn't mean that anything goes. Some things are clearly right out. And this is once again where the, for example, the major themes that are set forth in the creeds are so helpful. The rule of faith safeguards us against errant readings of Scripture… There's something fundamentally wrong when we engage in dialogue with another biblical interpreter and we do it with an arrogant, doctrinaire spirit.**
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> **— Dr. Carey Vinzant**

Now that we've seen how original meaning contributes to the full value of Scripture, let's turn our attention to biblical elaborations.

BIBLICAL ELABORATIONS

Biblical elaborations are:

> **Places where one part of Scripture directly or indirectly comments on an aspect of the meaning of another passage in Scripture.**

Because all Scripture is inspired and infallible, these elaborations always accord with and confirm original meaning. Sometimes, an elaboration is stated as a repetition of

a facet of the original meaning. At other times, a biblical elaboration may be stated as a clarification of things that weren't entirely apparent or well understood. And at still other times, a biblical elaboration can be an expansion of the meaning of a particular passage.
For example, the Bible elaborates on the commandment against murder in many places. The commandment is first recorded in Exodus 20:13, which says:

> You shall not murder (Exodus 20:13).

The first biblical elaboration of this passage we'll mention is primarily a repetition of these exact words in Deuteronomy 5, where Moses reminded the nation of Israel of the content of the Ten Commandments. In Deuteronomy 5:17, Scripture again says:

> You shall not murder (Deuteronomy 5:17).

This repetition confirmed the commandment and reminded God's people of the terms of his covenant. Of course, even when an elaboration is stated in the form of a repetition, it never merely repeats what was said before — the context of the elaboration always adds something to its meaning. Even so, it's helpful to recognize that some elaborations are repetitions in form.

The second type of elaboration we listed was clarification, and we find a clarification of the commandment against murder in Numbers 35. In that chapter, Moses distinguished between murder and accidental manslaughter. Listen to what Moses wrote in Numbers 35:20-25:

> If anyone with malice aforethought shoves another or throws something at him intentionally so that he dies or if in hostility he hits him with his fist so that he dies, that person shall be put to death; he is a murderer... But if without hostility someone suddenly shoves another or throws something at him unintentionally or, without seeing him, drops a stone on him that could kill him, and he dies, then … the assembly must protect the one accused of murder (Numbers 35:20-25).

This clarification provides information that was crucial to understanding the commandment against murder. It makes it clear that not every unlawful instance of killing a human being is also an instance of murder and that accidents shouldn't be punished in the same way that murder is punished. When a killing includes "malice aforethought," that is, when the killing is intentional and motivated by wickedness, the commandment requires a harsh penalty. But when the killing is accidental manslaughter, the commandment actually forbids the murder of the one who committed the act.

The third type of biblical elaboration we listed was expansion, in which Scripture provides additional information about the passage or topic it references. We find an expansion of the commandment against murder in Matthew 5, where Jesus criticized the rabbis of his day for wrongly limiting the commandment's scope. Listen to what Jesus taught about the commandment against murder in Matthew 5:21-22:

> You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, "Do not murder,

> and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment." But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment (Matthew 5:21-22).

Here, Jesus expanded the commandment against murder by applying it beyond the physical act of unlawfully taking a human life. According to Jesus' elaboration, unrighteous anger violates the same principle that murder does. Anger isn't as bad as murder, but it offends the same aspect of God's character.

> **Jesus, of course, in the Sermon on the Mount, he quotes many commands, one of them being, "You've heard it said you should not commit murder." And then he says, "But I tell you this, it's not about murdering, it's about hatred. That's the issue." And so I think reading Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount is incredibly important for us to understand the true meaning of the commandments, because I think that's what Jesus is doing… Jesus is getting to the heart of the issue. What Jesus is showing us — and I think we have to just apply what Jesus is saying — is that the command of murder, it's not an issue of I'm a good person because I've never committed murder; I've kept the command. What Jesus is saying is this … it's about the intent in the heart that murder arises from, and that is hatred.**
>
> **— Dr. Brian J. Vickers**

> **Jesus invites us to go back to the principles behind Exodus that it's not just enough not to commit the sin, but you shouldn't want to commit the sin. That is, Jesus is interested not only in our behavior but in our character, not just in what we do but in who we are. So he says, "You have heard it said you shall not kill." Jesus says you shall not want to kill… So he looks for the heart of the Law. He looks for the principle, and that principle is transcultural and invites us to want what God wants, and we can do that only when our hearts are transformed by God's grace, by the power of his kingdom at work in us.**
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> **— Dr. Craig S. Keener**

When Jesus and other teachers referred to Scripture, they normally talked about what was "written." But in Matthew 5:21-22, Jesus talked about what was "said," not what was "written." This was a common way of referring to what the Jewish teachers had said about what was written. Far from challenging the Old Testament, Jesus was refuting the popular interpretations of the Old Testament that had strayed from the Old Testament's original meaning.

This elaboration was an expansion of the original meaning of the commandment because it went beyond clarification. It didn't just explain the meaning of the words of

the commandment itself. Instead, it brought additional information from other passages to bear on the commandment in ways that revealed the original intention of the commandment within the broader context of God's revelation. Seen against this backdrop, Jesus pointed out that the commandment against murder had always been intended to reveal God's care for humanity, and that its original implications went far beyond the mere prevention of murder.

> **Well, God certainly does forbid murder in Exodus, and when Jesus addresses that command in the Sermon on the Mount, he proceeds to say that it embraces hatred and anger, what we would call "heart sins." Now there have been a number of ways of explaining what's going there. What is Jesus doing with that original command? Some have said he's setting it aside and he's introducing something new. Others have said that while the command given in Exodus was simply something external, and now Jesus is coming along and he's adding something entirely new, something unforeseen and uncontained in that Exodus command, and he's internalizing the law. I think the best approach is to say that Jesus is not saying something brand new, but he's simply drawing out what's in the command already. I think that's evident, for instance, when you look at the Decalogue, the tenth commandment, "Though shalt not covet." That is a command that addresses the heart and heart sins. And that, I think, is intended as a key to the whole Decalogue, that we shouldn't understand the commands of the Decalogue to be addressing merely external behaviors but also addressing heart actions, heart sins, heart attitudes underlying those behaviors. And so what Jesus does in the Sermon on the Mount is he is restoring and he is drawing out the Law in its full intent, even as he is sweeping away the corruptions that have come alongside in the course of history, the history of reading those commands in the life of God's people. So Jesus is standing, giving us the true intent of the Law and showing us the Law in its fullness.**
>
> **— Dr. Guy Waters**

The more we study the Scriptures, the more we see that the Bible elaborates on itself over and over. The prophets and psalmists regularly refer back to Moses' Law. Jesus continually referred back to the Old Testament. And New Testament writers did much the same time and again. At times, we may have difficulty understanding how biblical authors came to their conclusions. But in each case, biblical elaborations confirm other parts of the Bible by repeating them, by clarifying them and even by expanding on their original meaning. And they did all of this under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. And for this reason, as we explore the meaning of Scriptures, we must acknowledge and submit ourselves to all the places where the Scriptures elaborate on themselves.

So far in our discussion of the full value of Scripture, we've looked at original meaning and biblical elaborations. So, now we're ready to focus on the legitimate applications we can draw from a biblical text.

LEGITIMATE APPLICATIONS

We'll define legitimate applications as:

> **The conceptual, behavioral and emotional impacts that the original meaning and biblical elaborations of a passage should have on their audiences.**

Original meaning and biblical elaborations are inspired, and hold full authority over all believers in every age. That's why all legitimate applications of Scripture must be derived from and consistent with the Bible's original meaning and elaborations. But our applications are not inspired by God. We make mistakes, and our applications are always subject to modification and improvement. Even so, to the extent that our applications are true to Scripture, they're part of God's intended use for the Bible, and therefore part of the Bible's full value.

The *London Baptist Confession of Faith* from 1689, a famous Protestant summary of biblical doctrine, expresses this idea in its chapter 1, section 10:

> **The supreme judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Scripture delivered by the Spirit.**

Protestant churches almost universally acknowledge that human interpretation and application of the Bible are fallible. So, while human authorities are legitimate, they can never be the ultimate judges of truth. And while the application of Scripture to our lives is necessary, we should never treat our applications as if they were infallible like the Bible.

> **When we preach, there is an exposition — an explanation — and an application. The meaning of God's Word should be one, the meaning of the text should be one, and it should be the same throughout the centuries. But later, when it comes to seeing the text in context, it could have different applications for yesterday and today; it isn't a variation of the standard. It's a simple difference of application.**
>
> **— Dr. Miguel Nunez, translation**

> **There can only be one interpretation of Scripture. We can get multiple applications off of that one interpretation, but the application must stay true to the interpretation. We must seek to**

> **always exegete God's Word, bring out God's intended meaning of that particular passage or that particular verse, or we end up with eisegesis, which is where we bring in or put in our own opinions and our own interpretations, our own thoughts into what they may mean. From that you can get very faulty applications, which can lead to harm to the people that you may be teaching or preaching to… And so the interpretation has to be true to the application; the application has to be true to the interpretation.**
>
> **— Rev. Thad James, Jr.**

Keeping in mind that legitimate applications are part of the full value of Scripture, let's see how another Protestant tradition, represented by the *Heidelberg Catechism*, applied the commandment against murder. This catechism was written in sixteenth-century Europe in order to provide a helpful yet fallible summary of the teaching of Scripture. Question number 105 of the *Heidelberg Catechism* asks:

> **What is God's will for you in the sixth commandment?**

And the Catechism answers:

> **I am not to belittle, insult, hate, or kill my neighbor, not by my thoughts, my words, my look or gesture, and certainly not by actual deeds, and I am not to be party to this in others; rather, I am to put away all desire for revenge. I am not to harm or recklessly endanger myself either.**

The Catechism interprets the commandment against murder in light of many biblical elaborations, including Jesus' elaborations in Matthew 5 as well as Paul's teaching about revenge in Romans 12.

As we can see, the full value of the simple command "do not murder" can be extremely complex and multifaceted. Following Jesus and Paul, the writers of the *Heidelberg Catechism* legitimately applied this commandment not only to the unjust taking of human life, but also to all that is similar to murder in kind if not in degree, such as hatred and insults. Applications like these are based on the original meaning of the prohibition against murder, as well as on its biblical elaborations, and they're appropriate in our contemporary situations. For these reasons, they're part of the full value of the commandment against murder.

> **Well, if you ask the question, "What are the legitimate ways to apply the commandment 'You shall not commit murder'?" quite obviously it means that we shouldn't kill people. But it would be insufficient to infer that that is all that commandment is saying. Jesus himself said in the Sermon on the Mount that if you are angry with your brother, then you have committed murder. And he would then encourage us to see that our anger and our displeasure of the people is breaking that**

particular commandment. So in terms of applying it to today, I think that it is important that we help people see that the Ten Commandments still are deeply relevant because they understand the severity of offense against God, and they also make us appreciate that even our smaller actions, as we perceive them, whether they be lust, or anger, or other emotions and passions, actually have the potential of going so much further if God doesn't deal with them at the heart-level issue. So application of that biblical text should help people see how they, as it were, nip in the bud problems that could become much worse. And actually the problems even at the level of bud-level, Jesus tells in the Sermon on the Mount, are still serious.

— Dr. Simon Vibert

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is giving us his authoritative teaching on the Law, and one of the things he does is take commands and push them down to a deeper heart level as it were. And so when he says, "You have heard it said 'do not murder,'" that remains true. But Jesus goes beyond that and shows us the true intent of the law. He tells us that not only are we not to murder, but we're not even to say murderous words, words that might be hateful, words that would be equivalent to saying, "You fool." Or, we're not to hate our brother. And he's showing us, in other words, that the Law in Exodus, in the Ten Commandments, is not simply about not doing something. He's showing us there's a deeper intent that we should understand when we read these laws. And so the way to understand these laws is not simply a bare prohibition but is a positive command as well. It's not simply "don't murder," but "do promote life" … And so as Jesus breaks down the important parts of the Old Testament, he actually boils it down to two things: Loving God with all of our heart and loving our neighbor as our self. It's a positive command to love that is the true intent of the Law.

— Dr. Brandon Crowe

In the modern world, Christians have to make judgments about all sorts of issues related to the Bible's prohibition of murder. We have to deal with abortion, euthanasia, suicide, war, abject poverty and many other threats to human life and dignity. In each case, the commandment against murder places responsibilities on us. And one of our tasks as interpreters of Scripture is to figure out what those responsibilities are. As we do, we reveal more fully what the meaning of the commandment really is.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson on the complexity of meaning, we've discussed the history of viewing the literal sense of Scripture as its singular, grammatico-historical meaning, and we've described the full value of a biblical text in terms of its original meaning, biblical elaborations, and legitimate applications.

As we've seen in this lesson, there is one complex original meaning for every biblical passage. And it's so complex that it touches the concepts, behaviors and emotions of the original audience in many different ways. But beyond this, there are many partial summaries to be made of this complex original meaning. The original meaning provides an infallible framework, a foundation for our understanding. But to gain an awareness of Scripture's full value, we also have to find guidance in biblical elaborations and we also have to make many legitimate applications to our world today.

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GLOSSARY

allegorical sense – Approach to interpreting Scripture that treats people, places, things and events as if they were symbols or metaphors for spiritual truths

anagogical sense – Approach to interpreting Scripture that focuses on what the text says about the eschaton or last days

Aquinas, Thomas – (ca. 1225-1274) Italian theologian and Dominican friar who wrote *Summa Theologica*

Bernard of Clairvaux – (1090-1153) Influential French monk and theologian who opposed theology as a purely intellectual pursuit and promoted imaginative interpretations of passages divorced from their literal sense

biblical elaborations – Places where one part of Scripture directly or indirectly comments on an aspect of the meaning of another passage of Scripture

Cassian, John – (ca. 360 - ca. 435) Medieval monk and theologian who popularized the approach to biblical interpretation known as the quadriga

eschatological – Having to do with the study or doctrine of the last days

full value – The total significance of a text, consisting of its original meaning, its biblical elaborations and its legitimate applications

grammatico-historical method – A method of hermeneutics which investigates the Scriptures in their original languages and in view of their original contexts

Heidelberg Catechism – Sixteenth-century Protestant creed written to provide a unified summary of the teachings of Scripture.

hermeneutics – The study of interpreting the meaning and significance of Scripture

legitimate applications – The conceptual, behavioral and emotional impacts that the original meaning and biblical elaborations of a passage should have on their audiences

literal sense – Term referring to the original or grammatico-historical meaning of a biblical passage ; the plain or ordinary meaning of a text

London Baptist Confession – A Protestant summary of biblical doctrine for Calvinistic Baptists, first published in 1644; the Second London Confession was published in 1677 and republished in 1689

Luther, Martin – (1483-1546) Sixteenth century German monk and Protestant reformer who initiated the Reformation when he posted his 95 Theses on the door of the Wittenberg church in 1517

Neo-Platonism – A philosophical school of thought rooted in Plato; begun by Plotinus (A.D. 205-270); idealistic, spiritualistic teaching bordering on mysticism; taught that all existence comes from the "One," the "Absolute"

Origen – (ca. 185-254) Early Christian theologian from Alexandria; his works include: *On First Principles*, in which he defended the Scriptures as our final authority for Christian doctrine, and the *Hexapla*, a comparative study of various translations of the Old Testament

original meaning – The concepts, behaviors and emotions that Scripture's divine and human writers jointly intended the document to communicate to its first audience

Philo of Alexandria – (ca. 20 B.C. - ca. A.D. 50) Hellenistic Jewish philosopher and writer; considered to be the originator of the allegorical approach to interpreting Scripture

quadriga – An interpretive approach to Scripture that considered a biblical passage to have four distinct meanings

Renaissance – A period of “rebirth” between the middle ages and the modern era (from the 14th to the 17th centuries) that stimulated a renewed interest in classical Roman and Greek literature, art, and culture

sensus literalis – Latin phrase meaning "literal sense"; refers to the original or literal meaning of a biblical passage

sensus plenior – Latin phrase meaning "full sense" or "full value"; used to refer to the total significance of a text, consisting of its original meaning, all its biblical elaborations, and all its legitimate applications

tropological sense – Approach to interpreting Scripture that focuses on the moral or ethical aspects of the text