

# He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

Lesson 11

Modern Application  
for Individuals

Forum



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# He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

## Lesson Eleven: Modern Application for Individuals

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With

Dr. Jimmy Agan  
Dr. Bruce Baugus  
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Dr. Peter Chow  
Dr. Gary Cockerill  
Dr. Andrew Davis  
Dr. Dan Doriani

Dr. Craig S. Keener  
Dr. Ghassan Khalaf  
Dr. Michael J. Kruger  
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Dr. Robert L. Plummer

Dr. Philip Ryken  
Dr. Mark L. Strauss  
Dr. Miles Van Pelt  
Dr. Simon Vibert  
Dr. Brian J. Vickers

### Question 1:

#### Are the Bible's commands to love God and neighbor interconnected?

On several occasions, Jesus entertained questions regarding the greatest commandment in the Law. His response was simple. But instead of giving just one command, he gave two: love God and love your neighbor. So, why did he answer this way? Are the Bible's commands to love God and neighbor interconnected?

#### Dr. John Oswalt

When Jesus was asked to summarize the Old Testament Law, he said it is to love God — with your whole heart, mind, being — and your neighbor as yourself. When he said that, he is speaking of two sides of the coin of the Old Testament Law, which was in the context of a covenant. God was saying to his people, "I want you to be in this committed relationship with me, and you will demonstrate this relationship by your attitude toward me." When we think of the Ten Commandments, for instance, the first four commandments are related to God: You must not recognize any other gods. You must not make any images. You must not use the name of God in an empty way. You must dedicate one-seventh of your time to him. But then the other six are all in relationship to other people. This is a dramatic kind of statement. This is a commitment to God. Commitment to God has to do with religious stuff: prayers, offerings, that kind of thing. What does how I treat other people have to do with my relationship to God? It's because of who this God is. This God values people. This God values relationships. And that means that over and over again throughout the Old Testament, the prophets would say to the people, "You don't love God." And they would say, "Well, yes we do. We're doing all this religious stuff." They would say, "No, you don't, because you're treating other people as objects for your own strength, for your own position, for your own power. If you really loved God, you would show that by the way you treated other people, because that's how God is." And so, on the other hand, I can't say, "Well, I treat people really, really well, so obviously it doesn't

matter how I relate to God." Well, yes it does, because ultimately I may well be saying, "Well, I treat other people very, very well, so that means I'm good enough." And that can never be true. Ultimately, it is our relationship to God of faith, of trust, of belief, that makes a difference. But that has to be demonstrated in how I treat other people.

### **Dr. Greg Perry**

In Luke 10 we see Jesus put together the two great commandments, to love God and to love neighbor. He says that the second one is *like* the first one. Some New Testament commentators think that's a real innovation, but actually, if we look back in Deuteronomy 10 and 11, we see that Moses had those things put together as well. And if we read the Prophets well, we can see that the prophets' critique of Israelite society also put those things together. But there's something about the character of who God is, in that, God is not partial. He does not show favoritism. And because God doesn't show favoritism, we are to love the stranger. We are to love our neighbor in the same way that God loved Israel when they were strangers in Egypt. So, the law of God puts these commands together. And we see in the prophets' critique that the critique of idolatry — of worshiping other gods — and the critique of social injustice — in mistreating the workers and mistreating the poor — were actually interconnected in the prophet's mind, part of the same fabric of who God is and what it means to be created in God's image, and how you're to treat image bearers. And so, Jesus, like the prophets and like Moses, keeps these things closely tied together when he tells us the story of the Good Samaritan. It's because of who God is that we are to love our neighbors.

### **Dr. Craig S. Keener**

The Bible's commands to love God and neighbor are closely intertwined. And, in fact, Jesus brings this out in Matthew 22 and Mark 12. It was a common technique among ancient Jewish interpreters where they would connect texts that had a common key word or a common key phrase. And you have this in the very key command, "You shall love the Lord your God." It comes right after what Jewish people consider the cornerstone of their faith, the *Shema*, Deuteronomy 6:5: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and might." In Hebrew, *we-'a-hav-ta*, "you shall love." And then you have this command in Leviticus 19, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." And they both begin with *we-'a-hav-ta*, so Jesus naturally puts them together in a way that is his hearers couldn't object to. And actually, in the context, we can see that even further in Leviticus 19 where, "Love your neighbor as yourself," it also talks in the context about love the stranger, the alien who is in the land, which I think Jesus implicitly appeals to when he tells the story of the Good Samaritan, and somebody says, "Well, who's my neighbor? Whom do I have to love?" And he shows that that includes the Samaritan. Well, the very context in Leviticus 19 would have shown the same thing.

### **Dr. Jonathan T. Pennington**

We know that when Jesus was asked a very important question, "What is the greatest commandment?" that he gave a very important answer. And his answer wasn't

unique. In fact, it was entirely orthodox, and it was the right answer. He said that one must love God with one's heart, soul, mind and strength — in other words, one's whole person. It's not enough to love God only with intellectually or only by doing good things without actually caring, for example — all the ways that we could break up that unity of person. We need to be whole people and loving God wholly, even though we do it imperfectly, certainly. But Jesus didn't stop there. He said that, without being asked, that the second greatest commandment is like it. It's related to it. It's organically connected, and that is to love one's neighbor, love other people even as you naturally love and care for yourself. And so, I want to suggest that... there's not only a hierarchical relationship. It's not that you have one and you have then the other, loving God and loving others. That, in fact, there is an organic relationship between them because they both involve the whole person. They both involve a way of being in the world, or what we might say in ancient language terms, a "virtue"... a character habit of other-centeredness from a place of health and belief and trust in God. So, we love God and we love others because we are, by the grace of God and by his work of the Spirit, being transformed into a different kind of person. In fact, one of the things the Bible makes really clear is that, not only is there a hierarchical relationship, but there is this organic relationship, because the way that we really know that we love God is by how we treat other people. That's the pretty shocking message of the epistle we call 1 John, is that, at many points in that letter, he makes it very clear that if one says they love God but don't love others, that shows that they are deceived or deceiving others, because the main manifestation of loving God is not doing a bunch of pious things. The main manifestation of loving God is actually loving others. And if you go back to Jesus, you'll see he teaches just the same thing both in his teaching and ultimately in his own example.

## **Question 2:**

### **Are there some laws or commands in the Bible that we shouldn't obey?**

**We know that both the Old and New Testaments are part of the same overarching story of redemption in Christ. But sometimes, even devoted Christians debate the relevance of the Old Testament for the current age. This is particularly the case when it comes to the Old Testament laws and commands. Are there some laws or commands in the Bible that we shouldn't obey?**

#### **Dr. Mark L. Strauss**

The question of whether the New Testament is obligated to keep the Old Testament law is heavily debated in the evangelical world, in the conservative Christian church today. Some would argue that we keep facets of the Old Testament law, such as the moral laws, but we don't keep the ceremonial laws or the social laws, the civil laws related to Israel's history. Others say, and I think I would agree with this, is, the whole Old Testament law is fulfilled in Christ. He accomplished its purpose. He fulfilled it, if you will. But we are still obligated to keep God's ultimate law. In other words, God's nature, God's character is reflected in the New Testament law. And so, the New

Testament repeats many of the Old Testament commandments. Why? Because those commandments are reflections of God's nature, of God's character. But now, the law that is God's ultimate law is written on our hearts through the Holy Spirit, rather than on tablets of stone as in the old covenant. So, the law is fulfilled in Christ. The Old Testament law, the law given to Israel, is fulfilled in Christ, yet we obey and follow the law of Christ which reflects God's absolute and perfect character, which of course is unchanging.

### **Dr. John Oswalt**

One of the questions that people often ask is whether the New Testament church is required to keep the Old Testament law. And the answer is an unequivocal, yes, and, no. No, in the sense that those specific prescriptions that are found in the Old Testament Torah are, in fact, removed for us. We are not required to circumcise our boys. We are not required to go to the temple three times a year. We are not required... And you can go down the list. In fact, this was the discussion of the council in Jerusalem that's recorded in Acts 15. However, what is the intent of the Old Testament Torah? And I like to use the Hebrew word "Torah" instead of "law" because of what has happened to the word "law" in English. In English, "law" has come to be a negative term. It limits us. It shuts us in. It blocks our freedom. But Torah means "instructions" — the "instruction manual." Yes, it limits your freedom but it also enables you to use this machine as it was designed. In the sense that the Torah reveals to us the character and nature of God and the character and nature which we are expected to share. In that sense, yes, the Torah still applies. And I think you see this in Paul's letters. Paul can say to his readers, "No, you are free. You do not have to do all those things. And since you're free, of course, you're not going to steal, you're not going to lie, you're not going to covet, you're not going to commit adultery." So that, is it necessary for Christians to keep the Torah for our salvation? Absolutely not. But as those who have been freely saved, are we expected to share and exhibit the life of God? Yes. And to the degree the Torah reveals the life of God to us, yes, in that sense it is still incumbent on the New Testament church.

### **Question 3:**

#### **Why do believers today primarily focus on Scripture's behavioral applications?**

**When we interpret a biblical text and begin to apply it to our lives, we should always consider the ways the text will influence our concepts, behaviors and emotions. But often, we put the most attention on our behaviors. Why do believers today primarily focus on Scripture's behavioral applications?**

### **Dr. Dan Doriani**

Christian teachers and leaders so often focus on behavior instead of looking at the factors behind behavior that can allow the behavior to occur in the first place. I suppose we focus on behavioral matters because we feel like we're being practical

and concrete. But of course, the question is, what enables you to do what the teacher says? For example, we know the Bible says we should store up treasures in heaven. Of course, if we don't believe there's a God, or our faith is so weak as to be irrelevant, we're not going to do that. And so, you have to ask, "Do you believe in God enough? Do you believe that there is a heaven? Do you believe it's worth storing up treasures with God instead of seeking them right here, right now for yourself?" So, capacity of belief precedes the ability to obey. It would be almost like looking at somebody with many commands. You tell them to do the right thing. "You need to respect your leaders." Well, as someone once said to me, "The problem is, I *don't* respect my leaders. How can I respect leaders I don't respect?" Well, the problem is, there is something wrong in your heart. It's almost like telling somebody who is drowning — you're looking at them from a giant boat in the sea and they're drowning; you see they're drowning — and you say, "Hey Buddy, what you need to do down there is swim. If you swim you won't drown." Well, yes. But the problem is he can't swim. A good Christian teacher must address what the Bible calls the heart or the mind, which is the capacity, and drives the capacity, to obey. Otherwise, obedience is impossible ... So a pastor has to always begin, a leader always has to always begin by addressing the heart. Do you want to obey? Do you want to follow God? If there's no desire, you can give all the good concrete advice that you want. It won't lead to anything.

#### **Question 4:**

**Are the corporate aspects of our Christian lives equally as important as the individual aspects?**

**In both the Old and New Testaments, there are times when the Scriptures emphasize individual faith, and other times when the focus is on the community of believers. Some Christians today place a higher priority on the personal aspects of Scripture. But, are they right? Or, are the corporate aspects of our Christian lives equally as important as the individual aspects?**

#### **Dr. Philip Ryken**

Part of the beauty of the biblical teaching about the Christian life is that there is an equally strong emphasis on our personal response to the gospel and on our corporate response to the gospel. So I certainly, as an individual follower of Christ, need to obey the commands that God has for me and believe the promises that God has given me. But so much of the Bible is written, not in the singular, but in the plural. I think even of the Lord's Prayer. That's not a personal prayer. It's a corporate prayer for the whole community of God's people to share in together. And so, many of the commands and promises in the New Testament that are based in the gospel are given to the whole church. And so, I think it's important as we're reading the Bible, as we're trying to live out biblical principles, and also as we're teaching the Bible to others, to keep in mind both the personal response and the community response that the Bible holds in equal balance.



**Dr. P. J. Buys**

One of the main themes of the whole Bible to explain our relationship to God is the theme of the covenant. But the covenant is, on the one hand, a collective relationship ... God started it with Abraham and his children and the coming generations. It's not just something individual. In the same time, there is the element of individual commitment. I would say, if you look at the old concept of the covenant through the whole Bible, you will see four aspects to it. First of all, it is a legal relationship. Secondly, it is a collective relationship between God and his people, also called his family. And then thirdly, it is a personal relationship. All the promises of the covenant will only become yours when you come to the point of real personal commitment. But the moment you commit yourself personally to the Lord, you also commit yourself to his people. And you also realize that the promise is now for me and my family and my children and even the next generations — wonderful promises in that. And then fourthly, it has got a missional goal that many people do not often see. So, I think people go astray in many directions. Sometimes they don't see the communal aspect of the covenant, and then they are not serious about the church, and they are not serious about fellowship and relationships, and then they actually violate the covenant. On the other hand, sometimes people are so committed with the communal aspect that people never come to a real personal commitment. There are dangers on both sides.

**Dr. Bruce Baugus**

One of the great challenges I think that we face, especially perhaps in the West — although it's been exported to the rest of the world — is the extreme, almost, individualism that has entered into Western culture. That has permeated and affected the church. And we see this in evangelicalism as sort of a cultural phenomenon. And one of the evidences of this is the devaluation of the visible church and the ordinary means of grace that God has appointed for the church to benefit from and to use. You know, even in biblical interpretation... the Scriptures were given to the church, and the interpretation and reading of Scripture is to be a churchly task. And the sacraments were given to the church, and we exist together in a family in the church. And it's the church. To the church belongs the mission of God and so on. And when we see the effects of Western individualism on evangelicalism, what we see is a loss of appreciation for the church, and the visible church in particular, I mean. And with that, we see a kind of disintegration, almost, of the churchly aspect of the mission and the purpose of God in the world. And we are suffering the consequences of that to this day.

**Dr. Andrews Davis**

It's very important for us to see the balance in the Bible between the individual aspect of our walk with the Christ and the corporate or community aspect of our being a member of the body of Christ. Each one of us will stand alone and give an account of him or herself to God and we'll be alone in that account. No one can help us at that point. We will face Christ and tell him everything we did in the body, whether good or bad. And that's very individualistic. Each of us must enter through the narrow gate ourselves. We must be born again. We can't come in on the coattails of a godly father

or mother or friend. Each of us individually must repent and believe. And we all have to have our individual walks with Christ. We have our own good works to do, which God prepares in advance for us to walk in, and those are individualized by our spiritual gifts and by our providential circumstances. Those are things that are individual to each person. And no one can do our good works for us but ourselves. And we have to have our own walk with Christ, our own daily quiet times. We have to feed on Christ ourselves. We can't feed on someone else's faith. We have to have our own faith. That's the individual side. But the corporate side is very pronounced as well. We're members of the body of Christ. We are a part of a family of God. When we sin, others suffer. When we do well, use our spiritual gifts, others are blessed. And so, it's very important for us to see us in the corporate setting. And I think it's possible for some aspects of Christ's church around the world to focus too much on the individual side and forget how much of a family we are and how much we are to strive toward that unity in Christ that will be perfect in heaven. Actually, in John 17 he prays that we may be one so that the watching world can know that the Lord, that God, sent him. And so, I think it's important for us to keep a good balance between individualism, which is important, and that corporate life, which is also vital, important.

### **Question 5:**

**How important is it for us to be “doers” of the word and not only “hearers”?**

**On a number of occasions, biblical authors reminded their readers of the importance of applying Scripture. One of the more popular passages comes in the first chapter of James when James says that believers should, "not merely listen to the word," but "Do what it says." How important is it for us to be "doers" of the word and not only "hearers"?**

#### **Dr. Robert L. Plummer**

According to the Scriptures, if we claim to know someone, know God, know something about his Word, but we don't act upon it, then... we don't really *know* it. Our knowledge is belied by our practice. We think James 2 really speaks to this where there were people that James is writing to who apparently claimed to have genuine faith in God and know God and yet did not do what he commanded. And he said a faith like that is a demonic faith. The demons even know that there is one God, and they shudder at that. James says, "What good does that do?" Paul, in 1 Corinthians 13, says we can have knowledge, we can have all of these things, but if we don't have love, if we don't have our faith practiced through loving our neighbor and through loving God, then we're just a gong or a clanging symbol. So, really, a faith without love is no faith at all. It's a false faith. True faith evidences itself through good deeds and through practices of love.

**Dr. Jimmy Agan**

It's absolutely essential when we interpret the Bible that we put what we learn into practice. In other words, interpretation and application go together. You haven't done the one well if you haven't done the other. There are two ways in which I think that's important. One is that we show that we haven't rightly understood Scripture if we aren't applying what it teaches us. A great text to show that is Luke 7 as Jesus tells a little parable to Simon the Pharisee. Simon understands the point of the story — "Which one would love the money-lender more? The one who's forgiven more or less?" Simon gets the right answer, "Oh, the person who was forgiven the greater debt." But what Simon doesn't do is apply that parable to his own life. He doesn't see that that should change the way he views God, God's forgiveness of his sin, his own sin, and the sin of this sinful woman who's entered his home. So, Simon is not rightly interpreting the parable because he's not rightly applying it. Another way that we see the relationship between interpretation and application is that applying the Bible can actually help us understand it better. A good illustration of that would be Philippians 4 as Paul talks about prayer, and he says that peace will guard our hearts and minds in Christ from anxiety as we hand our concerns over to God in prayer. You really won't understand what Paul is talking about there unless you try it out. And when you do try it, you begin to understand, "Oh, that's what he meant. This is what he was saying." A similar thing may be with Psalm 23. Why is that psalm so comforting to people who are struggling with death or grieving someone who has passed away? Once you sense that in application, once you sense that comfort as you yourself are grieving, you read that psalm in a better light. So, we don't understand rightly if we don't apply, and sometimes applying can actually help us understand better as well.

**Dr. Ghassan Khalaf, translation**

It's very important for us, if we know and study the Bible well, to apply what we study in our daily lives ... This is because Christ desires, through the Bible, to show his life, his virtues in us, and his love for people through our love for them. For this reason, as interpreters of God's Word, we're required to live it. This is also required from those who hear our interpretation — that is, the ordinary believers in the church. When they hear these facts, they should adopt and live them to illuminate the light of Christ. And this is what we need to do as interpreters of the Bible. There is a beautiful and common saying that says, our life is a "*version*" of the Word of God, and from time to time we must issue a revised version of it. For example, just as the Bible is revised from time to time, if we are to remain alive and understood by people, we must issue a revised version of our spiritual lives to keep ourselves holy, rise spiritually, and cleanse our lives from impurities. We always issue a revised version in order to remain in full purity, because, as Paul says, we are God's message, "known and read by everybody." So we have to have a practical application of God's Word in our lives and remain a light *to* the world, just as Jesus is the light *of* the world.

## **Question 6:**

### **How does the Holy Spirit help us apply Scripture to our lives?**

**Left to our own understanding and skill, we'll never be able to apply the Scriptures faithfully to our lives. But the Bible tells us we can depend on the work of the Holy Spirit to guide us. How does the Holy Spirit help us apply Scripture to our lives?**

#### **Dr. Michael J. Kruger**

One of the great gifts God has given the church is the Holy Spirit to work in our lives as we hear the Word of God. The Word of God's power isn't just in hearing sounds. The power of the Word of God is hearing its word in conjunction with the Spirit applying it to our lives. And this is what's beautiful about the Christian life, is the Holy Spirit is there to take God's word and press it into our lives in different ways. And that happens in a number of different fashions. One way that happens is by the Holy Spirit's conviction of sin. When we hear the Word preached or we hear the Word taught, what the Holy Spirit does is presses into our lives in the areas that we aren't obeying God in ... And so, what makes the Word of God powerful in that sense is the Holy Spirit applying it to our hearts. Another way this happens is the Holy Spirit can apply the Word in that it encourages us and reminds us of particular things throughout the day that would help us live faithfully to Christ. And so, if we have the Word in our minds, the Holy Spirit can take that Word and bring it up, recall it in our daily lives so that at the particular moments we need it, it's there ... Because it's attended by the Holy Spirit, it's living. And if it's living, it's always working in our lives to convict of sin, to encourage, to motivate us to live lives more faithful to God.

#### **Dr. Gary Cockerill**

It's very important when we're interpreting Scripture to remember that the Holy Spirit is the inspirer of Scripture. Now, that doesn't mean we don't study it, study the language and the literary form and all that; we certainly do. God has incarnated himself in human life. The Holy Spirit inspired the Word of God in human language, in human literary form. So, it's very important for us to study it like we would study other books in a sense, realizing, though, that it all fits together looking at the whole of Scripture. But the Bible is also unique in that it is the only book in the world that when I read it, the author is present with me. And so, the author is not just somebody who is dead in the past or somebody I don't know, but the author is present with me. So, as I study it, I am relying on God and asking God through the Holy Spirit to help me ... So, I diligently study it by looking at the words and the context and the larger context and how it fits together in all of those things. But at the same time, I'm relying on the Holy Spirit who is standing there beside me, so to speak, and there to apply that word to my heart to speak, to help me grasp it. In my own study of Scripture, I've had this experience many times where I did all kinds of academic work, I'd worked on this text trying to understand what it meant, and then I just laid it before the Lord and said, "Okay, Lord, I've done all this work, but there's something here I haven't gotten. I'm waiting for you to give it to me." And then it would come. And so, it's

very important to depend on the Holy Spirit, the inspirer of Scripture, as we seek to interpret Scripture.

### **Question 7:**

#### **How can we avoid emotionalism when we emphasize the emotional aspects of Scripture?**

**When we seek to apply any text of Scripture, we know that the Bible speaks to us on many levels. Some passages deal primarily with concepts, others focus on behaviors, and still others stir our emotions. But when we come to a text that affects us emotionally, we must be careful to avoid taking those emotions too far. How can we avoid emotionalism when we emphasize the emotional aspects of Scripture?**

#### **Dr. Robert L. Plummer**

I think it's important to remember that God created the totality of the person, not just their mind but created humans as emotive beings and as thinking beings and as acting beings. So, when Jesus tells us we're to love the Lord God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength, it's with the totality of the person. And I think that one of the ways to avoid an extreme in one area is to seek to love God in all dimensions of the human person. So, in other words, if someone is very emotional in their love of God, crying and ecstatic, this person needs to be rooted in deep-thinking of Scripture. In 1 Corinthians 14, God tells us through Paul, Paul tells us, that God is not a God of disorder but a God of peace, and that where God's Spirit reigns, there's an order in the worship of the church. And so, where that is lacking, I think that reflects where the community is not living in accord with God's revelation. They need to be instructed. They need to learn. There needs to be intellectual learning and growth that then results in a balanced expression: joy, emotion, passion, but not out of control behavior.

#### **Dr. Miles Van Pelt**

There is no doubt that when we encounter the Bible as God's people and his Word that there's an emotional component to that. We are overcome by God's grace to us. We are overcome by God's goodness to us. We are overcome by the power that he exhibits in life. And so, there is an emotional component too, I think, in any Christian's life in terms of life in the church, life in God's Word, life with God's people. But how do you avoid emotionalism? Well, I think of emotionalism being kind of the opposite of intellectualism. So, you know, the Bible is just not about information, though it has information. But the Bible is just not about emotional response as well. I mean, our emotions must be rooted in the intellectual realities of the text. And so, I think when we talk about emotionalism, what I think I'm understanding in our culture is that people tend to want to be overly emotional about something in their lives or that they perceive is in a text without really understanding the text in its original context first. And so, being well grounded in the intellectual realities of Scripture, or just, say, the fundamental truths of Scripture, will produce

proper emotions, or what we might call proper Christian affections. And so, emotions good, intellect good, obeying God's Word good as the fruit of our intellectual apprehension of his Word and our emotional experience of it. And I think if we keep intellectualism and emotionalism as two extremes that can be avoided, because if you have the intellect without emotion, you really don't fully understand Scripture. Right? Because it has an emotional component to it. You can't read the book of the Psalms and the psalmist's cries to God and say there's no emotional component to Scripture. Right? But you can't read Paul and say there's no intellectual component to Scripture. There realities are wedded together. And we can maybe take a lesson from Paul who, when he's finished with his intellectual writings, frequently they'll end in doxology. That's the emotional component. So, let your intellectual capacities in Scripture to understand God's Word, drive towards doxology and the emotional expression of God's greatness and glory in his Word. And then, in that way, you can connect how you feel with God's revelation. So, you can feel, you can have your affections schooled, or trained by God's Word, avoiding emotionalism without the grounding or intellectualism, without the proper response in faith. So, I think that's one of the ways to avoid emotionalism is to keep it balanced with God's Word and let Scripture school your affections.

### **Question 8:**

#### **How can we know when to follow the examples of individuals described in the Bible?**

**When we read the Bible, it doesn't take long to see that many biblical characters lived flawed lives, even though God was directing them. And this can cause confusion as we look to those stories and passages for inspiration in how to live today. So, how can we know when to follow the examples of individuals described in the Bible?**

#### **Dr. Brian J. Vickers**

I think when we read the Bible and we read about characters and events in the Bible, the Bible will present those often as characteristics that we should carefully listen to and understand their circumstances and understand what they were going through for a positive example for us. But also, there's also plenty examples of negative characteristics that we're supposed to reject and avoid their behavior. This is how the writer of the Hebrews, for instance, deals with a large part of the history of Israel, as a warning against believers not to turn away. And, you know, Paul says that the Old Testament was written for our instruction. I'm just giving a couple of examples. And I think when we come to the Bible we have to remember that all the characters we're dealing with are sinners. If you're tracking along the Old Testament history, for instance, you never reach a point where you think, "Ah, this is the guy who's going to do it; he's going to bring everything to fulfillment." Right? You're always pointing forward. So, take an example like David where you can see both positive and negative aspects of his character. And he's presented clearly in the Bible that way.

God calls David a man after his own heart, but David's horrible sins are never hidden, always on display... It says that he basically followed God except in that issue with Uriah the Hittite. So, even in the kind of national memory of Israel, the greatest of the Old Testament kings is remembered as somebody who was a sinner and who fell into sin. And so, I think that we're given these characters to carefully read about and study, see ourselves in them, so that we both read them sympathetically and not just sort of brush them off, but see ourselves, I think, even in the failures that we see in Scripture, but also pointed in the way of righteousness and faithfulness to God through examples of faith as people withstood. Like, let's say, the prophet Jeremiah as he withstood persecution, or Isaiah who continued prophesying even though he's being threatened. Or Paul. Paul puts himself forward as an example, and he's the first one who recognizes his own sin. But he says, "Follow me insofar as I follow Jesus." And we can see Paul's life as a record of faithfulness to God that we can, and I think should, emulate insofar as God gives us the strength to do so.

### **Dr. Robert L. Plummer**

When we approach the Scriptures, I think sometimes it can be real tempting to think, well, these heroes of the faith are always to be an example for us. But clearly that is not the case. I remember when one of my young daughters decided to read through the Bible and was reading through Genesis. She came out shocked and troubled one night to discover that Noah had gotten drunk and was naked in his tent. And it gave an opportunity to instruct and say, well, the Bible, when it describes what people do, it's not always normative. It's not always something we're supposed to copy. Even people like Noah who, at points, are presented as examples, example of righteousness in his day, it doesn't mean that every activity that he did is praiseworthy or something that we should copy. Now, when you come to a narrative text where we have all of these different characters, it can be very challenging to decide which of their activities are praiseworthy and which are not. And to do that you often have to look at the entire text and look at the clues that the author has given you throughout the entire narrative as to whether he approves or disapproves, as the inspired writer of that text, of what that person is doing. So, he doesn't step out of every single story and say, "Oh, by the way, this was good," or "This was bad." An example of this in the book of Judges. If you read Judges 11, Jephthah is depicted as apparently sacrificing his daughter, a human sacrifice. At that point, the author doesn't step out and say, "Oh, and this is really a horrible thing that Jephthah did." He just goes on with the narrative. But if you look at the book of Judges, through the arrangement of the cycles of rebellion and through the narrator's comments that everyone was doing what they thought in their own eyes was right, we become aware that the whole book of Judges is a story of what's wrong in Israel. And so, when we encounter these horrific stories, that then the author doesn't make a comment immediately there, then we understand that he's disapproving of them, and he doesn't have to step out of each individual story and say that. The authors of the New Testament, as well, looking back on the Old Testament, give us a grid to understand and interpret which characters we should understand responded to God in a praiseworthy way in which specific incidences.

**Dr. Simon Vibert**

Within the New Testament in particular, the writers will refer to Old Testament characters who are held up as positive examples. So, take for example, David. David is held up as being a great example of a king who was a man after God's heart and who faithfully led the people of God. But, of course, when you read the Old Testament narrative, you note that David is actually a flawed character. There are many things in which we are intended to emulate him in his worship of God and in his leadership of the people. There are also many things we're not intended to emulate in terms of his immoral behavior and the fact that he was a flawed human being. Similarly with Solomon. Solomon, in many respects, was a great king because, finally, the nations around came to worship. But in fact, rather than him teaching them about the true God, they compromised him and he fell away. So, when we actually read the detail of the text, we see that the Bible is not inherently commending *everything* about the character, but actually the things that they point to, the things that we should follow. So, David's wholehearted worship that he expresses in his Psalms is something that we should follow. The way David pointed to King Jesus is something that we should also follow. But that doesn't mean that we should then copy every bit and every detail of their life.

**Dr. Jonathan T. Pennington**

One of the primary functions of the Bible, especially the narratives or story portions of the Bible — which makes it most of the Bible — is, in fact, to provide us with models to emulate or to avoid. The virtues or character traits of godly people are given to us in Scripture so that we might learn to follow them, even as the apostle Paul says, "Imitate me," he says to his young disciple, "as I imitate Jesus." Or, there are plenty of examples of people in the Scripture whose viceful ways of living, whose sinful ways of living are models for us to not follow that. The danger is always in reading Scripture only for that reason, not without first seeing that the Scriptures teach us about God first and foremost. Martin Luther gave a great example of this in a little essay he wrote a long time ago about how the Scriptures provide us in Christ both gift and example, that we must first read the Scriptures — and particular he's talking about the Gospels — but when we first read the Scriptures, seeing that God is a gift to us in Christ, that he's giving us the gift of justification and grace. And once we've gotten that gift clear, then we can see that Jesus and his disciples provide a model to follow. But you've got to get them in that order. If you look at Jesus and the other disciples as only a model without first having the gift of grace and justification, then it would be mere moralism. But once we do understand and are born again and have the Spirit-given gift of righteousness and new life, then the Bible is full of great models for us to follow.



**Question 9:**  
**How can we develop the skills we need to interpret  
the Bible responsibly?**

**Any area of expertise requires a number of skills in order to perform its tasks properly. And the same is true for biblical interpretation. For most of us, interpreting the Bible doesn't come naturally. It often requires hard work and discipline. How can we develop the skills we need to interpret the Bible responsibly?**

**Dr. Simon Vibert**

Every reader of the Bible needs to develop the skills in order to go about reading the biblical text. And the analogy I like to use is of filling the old toolbox with the various tools you might need in order to go about reading the text. So they include things like: some understanding of original languages, if you're able to do so; some understanding of basic grammatical structure of sentences and paragraphs and words; some basic etymology of the meaning of words and, so doing, word studies of biblical passages is helpful; and a whole sort of plethora of different tools that you want to put in your toolbox that make us good readers. And reading the Bible at one level is just like reading any ancient text. It requires us to understand a bit of the history, to understand how the text would have been written and understood by original hearers. That's not the totality of the task, but it's essential that those basic tools are in place in order that you can make your very first step at reading a biblical text.

**Dr. Brian J. Vickers**

I think the way we develop skills to understand biblical passages, we have to come at it in more than one way. The most basic thing we can do, and the thing that really everybody has access to apart from even going to seminary or learning methods, the first and most important step — and it's also the last step and still the most important step — is to know the Bible as well as we possibly can. One of the great legacies of the Reformation is that the Bible is its own interpreter. And so even if we learn various methods and steps and certain questions to ask of the Bible, unless we have an intimate knowledge of the Bible itself from Genesis to Revelation, even the best methodologies will be of limited use for us. So, the good news is this: to become really good interpreters of the Bible, what you need most, and what will do the most good, is to have a Bible that you read. It might sound self-explanatory or something nobody needs to point out, but I can't stress that enough. Now having said that, we can follow and learn particular methods for learning how to interpret different parts of the Bible, and that's what we need to do. So the next step is we learn to read different parts of the Bible. So that we learn that we read an epistle from Paul differently, in a way, than we do, say, Psalms. It's similar to the way that if, in the course of the day, I might read a newspaper and a technical manual and a letter or an email and something else, and I won't read all those the same way even though they're all words. So, I'll learn, and I have learned over time, how to read those different things, and I don't confuse them. And so we can learn through — I mean, there's lots of good resources available that will teach us how to read different parts of the Bible — and

then we can learn Bible study methods from asking the important questions like, what does this say about God? What does this say about us? What is God saying through this text that I need to be doing in terms of behaviors or change behaviors? So, you're just thinking, or in praise and worship to him, any number of things. We just ask these basic questions and remember the Bible is speaking to us. It's not just about us. It's also speaking to us from God. It's about God and his word to us. So, there are lots of ways we can approach interpreting the Bible, and the first and best way is to read the Bible.

### **Question 10:**

#### **How can pastors apply the Scriptures to the variety of individuals in their churches?**

**One of the roles of a pastor is to help the people in his congregation see the relevance of Scripture in their lives today. And yet, there are as many different needs and applications in a single congregation as there are people. How can pastors apply the Scriptures to the variety of individuals in their churches?**

#### **Dr. Jonathan T. Pennington**

All throughout the world the Scriptures are being read and preached from, to all different cultures and languages and places. And throughout history this has been the case as well. And so, it seems like it would be difficult to apply the Bible to all these different people. But what is universal about every hearer of the Bible is that every hearer is a person who needs to discover the freedom of the grace of God, because every person needs freedom from guilt and shame and the power of sin. And that bondage that we're all in, to our sinfulness, is what unites us all across all of humanity in time and space. And so, every passage of Scripture is applicable to every believer, because in it we see the gospel of God's grace working out his plan of salvation to free us from this guilt and shame and the power of sin. And so, pastors, and anyone teaching, or anyone just reading the Bible on their own, has a direct connection to the meaning of every passage of Scripture, because in it, the gospel of God shows forth into our most basic, universal human need.

#### **Dr. Robert L. Plummer**

One of the things that I struggle to do when I preach in my local church as a pastor is to... really bring out those implications for the single mom or for the guy who's out of work, or for the teenager who's zoning out. And how do I really help them to hear what the Scripture is saying to them in their particular life situation? And one of the best ways that I've found to help do that is to really know my congregation, to spend time with them so that whether it's speaking to them during the week or after the service, spending time with them, being involved in counseling, that you're aware of the struggles that people have and of their hopes and their dreams and their fears and that you're conscious of those when you're preparing a sermon. One of the things I love to do is when I run — I like to run for exercise — and I think about the text I'm

preaching on, and thoughts come to my mind about people in the church and struggles and the desires they have. And the more time I have to meditate on it and think about, the more I feel that I can bring that home to them. Another pastor at the church, he told me he uses a grid. Whenever he preaches, he always thinks about how does this truth speak to three different kinds of people? How does this speak to the skeptic in the church, someone who's coming there who's kind of doubtful about what you're saying or questioning it? How does this speak to the person who's struggling and maybe who says, "I hear what you're saying, and I'm failing at that, and I feel, how can God accept me?" And then, how does it speak to the Pharisee? How does it speak to the person who thinks they have it all together and what you're saying they mastered a long time ago?

**Dr. Peter Chow, translation**

Everyone is different. Those who are too introverted need to learn that it's not that scary to do personal evangelism. Those whose witnessing style is too aggressive must be told to be gentler. People are very different, and you must teach different things according to different personalities. For example, in 1 Corinthians 7, Paul teaches about marriage. He speaks of some people having the gift of being single. And so, he says that they should be like him. It's better for them to be single because then they can serve the Lord with undivided attention. For another group of people, the majority of people, in order to avoid temptation, it's better to be married. There's another group of people, the remainder, who have unbelieving partners. They also need specific teaching on how to live. If the unbelieving partner is willing to stay with you, then do not separate, because that way you can bring that unbelieving partner to the Lord and can take care of the children besides. Also, if the unbelieving partner insists on leaving, and there is no peace in the home, 1 Corinthians 7:15 says to let them leave, and the believer is no longer bound by the marriage. It's a passive divorce when the other party insists on leaving. We can see from this that Paul had different teachings for different situations. This is also true if you look at the big picture of the entire Bible. So, we must make the remedy fit the problem. If someone lives in a society that is very hostile to Christ, he should imitate Joseph or Daniel. If the church is not persecuted very fiercely, he can refer to Paul in the time of Acts. If the persecution is very, very severe, he should refer to Revelation. In different circumstances the Bible has different teachings, so we have to find the right solution for the problem.

**Sound biblical interpretation should always lead to responsible application. If we're to grow in our ability to interpret and apply Scripture, we need to develop the skills. But we must never neglect the role of the Holy Spirit who guides us in both of these processes. And we can rest assured that he will bring us to the truth as we interpret and apply his Word in our lives today.**

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**Dr. Jimmy Agan** is Professor of New Testament and Director of Homiletics at Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri.

**Dr. Bruce Baugus** is Assistant Professor of Philosophy and Theology at Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson, Mississippi.

**Dr. P. J. Buys** is Missiology Research Professor at Northwest University in South Africa.

**Dr. Peter Chow** is the president of China Evangelical Seminary in Taiwan.

**Dr. Gary Cockerill** is Academic Dean and Professor of Biblical Interpretation and Theology at Wesley Biblical Seminary in Jackson, Mississippi.

**Dr. Andrew Davis** is pastor of First Baptist Church in Durham, North Carolina, and Adjunct Professor of Historical Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

**Dr. Dan Doriani** is the senior pastor of Central Presbyterian Church in Clayton, Missouri.

**Dr. Craig S. Keener** is Professor of New Testament at Asbury Theological Seminary.

**Dr. Ghassan Khalaf** is Professor of Biblical Studies at Arab Baptist Theological Seminary in Lebanon where he previously served as President from 1993-2008.

**Dr. Michael J. Kruger** is President of Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte campus, and Professor of New Testament.

**Dr. John Oswalt** is the visiting distinguished professor of Old Testament Asbury Theological Seminary.

**Dr. Jonathan T. Pennington** is Associate Professor of New Testament Interpretation at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

**Dr. Greg Perry** is Associate Professor of New Testament and Director of City Ministry Initiative at Covenant Theological Seminary St. Louis, Missouri.

**Dr. Robert L. Plummer** is Associate Professor of New Testament Interpretation at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky.

**Dr. Philip Ryken** is the President of Wheaton College in Illinois.

**Dr. Mark Strauss** taught at Biola University, Christian Heritage College, and Talbot School of Theology before joining the Bethel Seminary faculty in 1993.

**Dr. Miles Van Pelt** is the Alan Belcher Professor of Old Testament and Biblical Languages, and the Academic Dean at Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson Campus.

**Dr. Simon Vibert** is the former Vicar of St. Luke's Church, Wimbledon Park, UK, and is presently the Vice Principal of Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, and Director of the School of Preaching.

**Dr. Brian J. Vickers** is Associate Professor of New Testament Interpretation and Biblical Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He is also an assistant editor for “The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology.”