

(T) Welcome to **Discipleship training On The Air**. In this teaching series you may learn to become a disciple of Jesus Christ. Two teachers will teach from the Bible what is a disciple of Jesus Christ. As you listen to this programme, make notes in a notebook or record the programme. Today's teaching is: A DISCIPLE INTERPRETS THE BIBLE CORRECTLY.

In 2 Timothy 2:15, the apostle Paul urges Christians, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth." We will learn some important general principles of interpretation as well as a few grammatical, theological and practical principles of interpretation.

(S)      **POINT 1. GENERAL PRINCIPLES OF INTERPRETATION**

**Principle 1. The Bible is supernatural in character.** The author of the Bible is God, the Holy Spirit. Therefore the Bible is trustworthy and the absolute authority for human thought and behaviour. The proof is in 2 Timothy 3:16. It says, "*All Scripture is God-breathed*".

(T)      **Principle 2. The Bible is also natural in character.** It is God's word through people to people. And it is written in the spoken languages of that time. The proof is in Matthew 22:43. Jesus said, "How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him 'Lord'?"

(S)      **Principle 3. The Bible in your language is God's Word.** The Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew and Aramaic and the New Testament in Greek. The Old Testament was translated into Greek before 250 BC and is treated by the New Testament as the Word of God. The Bible in your language is an accurate translation of the Bible in these original languages.

(T)      **Principle 4. The Bible can only be properly understood and interpreted by saving faith and the work of the Holy Spirit.** Non-Christians are spiritually dead and their eyes are covered, so that they cannot interpret the Bible correctly. Also the religious leaders of other religions cannot interpret the Bible correctly. The proof is in 2 Corinthians 3:15-17, "To this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. ... But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. The Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit is, there is freedom."

(S)      **Principle 5. The Bible is its own interpreter.** The proof is in Luke 10:26, Jesus answered, "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" When people asked Jesus questions about things written in the Bible, he often answered them with answers that are written in the Bible. For example, the obscure statement of Moses about divorce in Matthew 19 is explained by the clear commands of God in the Old Testament and the clear teachings of Jesus and the apostles regarding marriage and divorce. Although Moses said, "The husband can give a letter of divorce to the wife", Jesus taught, "What God has joined together, let no man separate." *The Bible best explains the Bible!*

(T)      **Principle 6. The Bible is a unity.** The Bible is God's only revelation. The Old Testament and the New Testament do not contradict each other. They are complimentary. The Old Testament prepares for the New Testament, and the New Testament fulfils the Old Testament. The proof is in Matthew 5:17, Jesus says, "I have not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets, but to fulfil them." However, there is progress in God's revelation. The proof is in Colossians 2:17. It says that the rules and regulations of the Old Testament Law "are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ." The New Testament teaches how God in Christ fulfils the Old Testament laws, types and prophecies. The Bible calls these Old Testament laws, types and prophecies "a shadow of the things that were to come." They prophesy Christ's coming and are pictures pointing forward to Christ.

(S)      **Principle 7. The Bible has only one meaning.** God is truthful and intends to reveal his purpose clearly. The proof is in Titus 1:2, "God ... does not lie." Therefore, any passage in the Bible does not have a double meaning. You should therefore try to understand *what God intends to say* in each passage. An Old Testament prophecy may have an initial fulfilment during the Old Testament period and a final fulfilment during the New Testament period. Nevertheless, the Old Testament prophecies and teachings must always be interpreted in the light of the New Testament teachings.

(T)      **Principle 8. Biblical examples do not determine what the Bible teaches.** Biblical examples are only authoritative when clear teaching concerning the same subject in the Bible supports them. The example of how Jesus prayed is not normative. The *example* of Jesus in Mark 1:35, where he went out to a lonely place to pray early in the morning is not normative for Christians. However, *the teaching* of Jesus about prayer in Matthew 6:5-8 about praying in a place alone with God is normative for all Christians.

(S)      **Principle 9. The Church does not determine what the Bible teaches, but the Bible determines what the Church should teach.** The proof is in Mark 7:13, where Jesus accuses the Pharisees by saying, "You nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down." Jesus accused the Pharisees of making their own

religious traditions and decisions more important than what the Bible teaches. Over and over again, Jesus taught that people should believe his words and put them into practice. The proof is also in 1 Timothy 3:14-15, where the apostle Paul says, "I am writing these instructions so that ... you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the church of the living God." The apostle Paul tells the Church that it has to follow the written instructions in his letters.

(T) **Principle 10. The Bible may not be interpreted in the light of personal experience, but personal experience should be interpreted in the light of the Bible.** The proof is in Jeremiah 23:16 and 29. This is what the Lord Almighty says, "Do not listen to what the prophets are prophesying to you; they fill you with false hopes. They speak visions from their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord. Let the prophet ... who has my word speak it faithfully." God rejects the experiences of visions and dreams of the false prophets. All true words of God have their origin in the objective revelation of God's words, not in the subjective experiences of man.

(S) **Principle 11. Each Christian has the right and responsibility to study and interpret the Bible for himself.** The proof is in Colossians 3:16, where the apostle Paul commands, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another." Jesus frequently exhorted ordinary people to *understand* what he was saying, *to put his teachings into practice* and even to *teach his commandments* to other people.

(T) **Principle 12. The primary purpose of the Bible is to change our lives.** The proof is in Matthew 7:24, where Jesus Christ teaches, "Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock." The prophets, Jesus Christ and the apostles all exhorted the readers of the Bible to "be holy, because God is holy." The way to holiness is to *obey* the Bible teachings, not just to *know* these teachings.

## (S) **POINT 2. GRAMMATICAL PRINCIPLES OF INTERPRETATION**

**Principle 1. Interpret a word, sentence or passage in relation to its context.** The context of a word is its sentence. The context of a sentence is its paragraph. Etc. For example, the word "lion" in the Bible represents Satan as a destroyer in 1 Peter 5:8, but the same word "lion" represents Jesus Christ as the victorious Messiah in Revelation 5:5. Therefore, the same word may have different meanings in different contexts.

(T) **Principle 2. Figurative language may not be interpreted literally or by a free imagination. Figurative language must be interpreted in the light of the teachings of the whole Bible, in accordance with its literature type as for example poetry, prophecy or apocalypse, and in its immediate context.** Figurative language is used to speak about unfamiliar, spiritual and infinite truths. When a word or expression is used in a different sense from that which properly belongs to it, the statement may be considered as figurative. For example, in John 6, the "flesh" of Jesus Christ, which we must "eat", and the "blood" of Jesus Christ, which we must "drink", is not literal, but figurative language. By comparing John 6:54 with John 6:40, "eating the flesh and drinking the blood" of Jesus means that people must receive the Spirit of Jesus into their hearts and lives by faith! The poetic books like the Psalms, the prophetic books like Ezekiel, the parables of Jesus Christ and the apocalyptic book of Revelation contain much figurative speech and need careful explanation.

## (S) **POINT 3. THEOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES OF INTERPRETATION**

**Principle 1. The Bible is a unity - one revelation.** All the Bible's teachings form a unity and do not contradict each other. Do not determine the meaning of a Bible passage *independent of the rest of the Bible*, but seek its unity with all other Bible teachings related to it. Therefore make use of "Cross-references" to other parts of the Bible to understand the passage you study. Distinguish carefully between passages with the same teaching, passages with similar teaching and passages with contrasting teaching.

**First. Passages with the same teaching:** In his parable about the mustard seed in Matthew 13 (vs. 31-32) Jesus uses the term "kingdom of heaven", but in Mark 4 (vs. 30-32) he uses the term "kingdom of God". Because both authors record the same parable, these terms are synonymous. Therefore the Sermon on the Mount may not be relegated to some future "kingdom of heaven" that is different from the "kingdom of God" in the present.

**Second. Passages with similar teaching:** In Luke 14:26 Jesus teaches that a person, who does not "hate" his family members, cannot be his disciple. And in Matthew 10:37 he teaches that a person, who "loves" his parents more than Christ, is not worthy of him. The two teachings are similar. Therefore the word "hate" in Luke 14:26 does not speak of the person's feelings, but rather of his choices and behaviour. Jesus Christ demands that his disciples must choose him or prefer him above all other human relationships on earth. Otherwise they cannot serve him.

**Third. Passages with contrasting teaching:** Many times a passage cannot be fully understood until it has been compared with contrasting teaching. Many truths in the Bible do not stand alone, but are interlocking and interdependent. In Matthew 7:1, Jesus says, "Do *not judge*, or you too will be judged." If this truth is made to stand isolated from other truths in the Bible, then no Christian may ever judge another human being. However, other Bible passages, like John 7:24, 1 Corinthians 5:9-13, 6:1-6, teach that Christians *should judge* each other.

Therefore Christians should judge the behaviour of other Christians, but not the behaviour of non-Christians. Apparent conflicts between Bible passages are resolved by making a “Topical Bible Study” of all biblical teaching on a particular subject and with reference to all the contrasting passages.

(T) **Principle 2. In building Christian doctrine, begin with a sound interpretation of each Bible passage.**

(S) **Principle 3. In building Christian doctrine, not all data is of equal importance.**

First. Give greater weight to teaching often repeated. A doctrine should be built on a broad foundation of many texts and biblical emphases. The unanimity of the testimony of many Bible passages provides a solid foundation for sound doctrine.

Second. Prefer direct, literal teaching above figurative, poetic and historical passages, unless these are literal interpreted by the Bible itself.

Third. Prefer the clear passage above the obscure passage.

Fourth. Give precedence to later revelation above earlier revelation. Many Old Testament teachings are superseded in the New Testament, because of the progress of revelation and salvation history in the Bible. However, Old Testament teaching may only be set aside with New Testament authorisation.

Fifth. Bible doctrine should reflect Bible emphasis. To distort the teaching of the Bible simply by emphasising some truths and failing to emphasise other truths, is the greatest source of denominational differences. For example, by emphasising “the gift of tongues”, the Corinthian church distorted the doctrine of the spiritual gifts.

(T) **Principle 4. In building Christian doctrine, base every doctrine on the entire Bible and not just on a Bible verse.** A doctrine may only be considered “biblical” when it includes and sums up all the Bible says about it.

(S) **Principle 5. The Bible is its own interpreter.** The New Testament teaches how God in Christ fulfils the Old Testament teachings, laws, types and prophecies. Therefore some Old Testament teachings do not apply to the New Testament. For example, the Old Testament Ceremonial Law no longer applies, because according to Matthew 5:17 it has been *fulfilled* by Jesus Christ, according to Colossians 2:14 it has been *cancelled* and according to Ephesians 2:15 its rules and regulations have been *abolished* from the Christian community by the death of Jesus Christ. The Old Testament Ceremonial Law stipulated rules and regulations with respect to holy persons, like priests and Levites, holy places, like the Tent of Meeting and the Temple, holy times, like the Sabbath, fasts and feasts and holy actions, like circumcision, eating clean foods, offering sacrifices and bringing the first portion and the tithes. All these Old Testament laws no longer apply in the New Testament period, because according to Hebrews 8:5 and 10:1, these Old Testament laws were only “a shadow of the real things that were to come”.

(T) **POINT 4. PRACTICAL PRINCIPLES OF INTERPRETATION**

**Principle 1. Every teaching in the Bible should be received as normative for faith and living, for every person in all societies of all time, unless the Bible itself limits the audience.** All commands, prohibitions and teachings are normative, unless they are directed to a specific person or group or age or condition. For example, in Mark 10:21, Jesus says, “go and sell everything you have and give it to the poor”. Because Jesus says these words to a specific person, a rich young ruler, these words are not normative for all Christians everywhere. These words were normative for “the rich young ruler” (Mark 10:17).

(S) **Principle 2. God desires the response of faith and obedience to both specific and general commands, prohibitions and teachings.** The response is always faith and obedience. However, the content of doctrine, which must be believed, and the way of obedience are not always immediately apparent. God reveals his will through specific and general teachings. For example, the *general command* in Luke 10:27, “Love your neighbour as yourself”, has *specific applications* revealed in the Bible, like “being a good Samaritan” and “loving your enemies”. It has more *possible applications*, for example, “warning your neighbour against danger”, “giving him constructive advice”, “contributing to his needs and “showing mercy and forgiveness to him”.

(T) **POINT 5. ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT WEEK**

First. Memorise these principles and apply them diligently whenever you read and study the Bible.

Second. See the workbooks “Go and make disciples” and Internet on www. Etc.

Third. Listen on short wave radio every SATURDAY to WEDNESDAY to “Discipleship training on the air”.