

Biblical Understanding.
Romans 9

1 Corinthians 1:1-17
1 Corinthians 1:18-31
Responsive Psalm 98

This weeks message went in a different direction then I initially intended. Every week when I sit down to study and prep for the sermon I don't really have any idea how its going to end up or where the text is going to take us. It is my practice each week to sit down and take a section with a sort of blank slate, or at least I attempt to, and let the passage itself guide the sermon. That is why I struggle with preparing something for holidays, or even going into a more topical focused message. But this week for whatever reason ended up being different, I intended to do a quick recap on chapter 9 and them move in a bit to chapter 10, but instead it has become more or less a message on biblical interpretation practices. Many of us here have been through various different levels of teaching on that subject, but the kids have maybe only see it in practice but not generally talked about. So, as I was getting everything prepared this week that ended up being the direction that sort of naturally happened, through we are still yet going to recap chapter 9 a bit, the focus of today is how improper biblical interpretation can lead to bad doctrine.

When reading through scripture as we all know there are definitely layers of understanding to be parsed out, as we grow in our faith, and maturity old passages that we are very familiar with become new as the spirit leads us to new understanding in our growth. You can study scripture your entire life and still come away with questions, and still learn new things as the spirit reveals them to you. That has been one challenge for me over the years as learning to prepare a sermon, It seems there are a couple of ways one can approach reading the bible. People often approach he bible as a book of stories, having not much else meaning then some accounts written down by some men, not seeing the purpose or reason, but only seeing it as a book full of fantastical stories with no weight or meaning.

Another way is to read the bible an instruction booklet, you see it as a set of practical wisdom and parables to teach great lessons about life, looking at this written word more like a collection of fables with a moral meaning to teach then the actual word of God. And I would argue that this was the mistake of Israel, as they read the scriptures that they had, taking a very literal understanding which of course is only one aspect of the word of God, and in doing so missed the reality of it, that this word is the living breathing word of God. Both of these examples is how the bible reads if an individual does not have the spirit to help and to guide in understanding that the bible lays out God's purpose and plan of salvation for his people. With the new eyes granted by the spirit we can read the bible and see the wonderful works of God and how it pertains to our own lives even. The next step, is it seems that another way to read the bible is to not let it speak for itself, that is having a certain belief or understanding before hand and applying it to everything a person reads. This person tends to get caught up in some passages seeing them as difficult to understand, such as a few passages here in Romans is a good example talking about the sovereignty of God in salvation. Since they come to the scriptures with a preconceived notion of how salvation works, they miss the beauty of the reality and they find it offensive and attempt to explain it away. Just as Israel made the mistake of seeing the scripture without understanding applying only to the physical aspect, the practicing of the moral law, and traditions, and believing that the Messiah was coming to free them from Roman rule and establish the nation of Israel as a world power again. Those who come to scripture with a preconceived notion or idea have the ask the question that Satan asked Eve in the garden....did God really say that? I mean, surely man has free will right?

And being unable to mesh what scripture says about God's sovereignty in salvation, and the idea of man's own ability to choose, there is an attempt to explain away some of these deeper and beautiful passages and in doing so lose the sense of security and hope that we have that Paul talks about here, since God has chosen us, he will by no means let any go. The goal, when reading scripture is to understand what the author is saying, for these letters, these accounts God has ordained to carry on generation after generation so that we may know him, and if we come to scripture believing we already know then we will miss pieces and aspects of him, and not fully taste his glory, or see his mercy.

And that vision of his mercy that we see, grows as we grow in understanding and maturity through the spirit. Allowing scripture to speak for itself is the first step, and instead of trying to explain away the hard to understand because of our own ideas or beliefs, rather dig in to understand what is being said. A good example of this is the law, and what is its purpose for the believer today, what does it mean to enter into the sabbath rest. I bring this up because this is a debate that seems to be ongoing, and an area where we part from our reformed brethren who see the sabbath as a day that must be held in high esteem, yet throughout the new testament the sabbath is used interchangeably with the rest we find in Christ. Again coming to scripture with our own preconceived understanding and not letting it simply speak for itself. Turn with me to Hebrews 3 real quick as I just want to show what I mean here about a simple reading of scripture to extract its meaning, laying aside our own preconceived ideas and let scripture itself speak for itself. Verse 14, "For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end, while it is said, Today, if you will hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion. For who having heard, rebelled? Indeed, was it not all who came out of Egypt, led by Moses? Now with whom was he angry 40 years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose corpses fell in the wilderness?" And here it is, the verse I want to focus on, "and to whom did he swear they would not enter his rest, but to those who did not obey? So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief."

Is the author talking about a certain day of rest here? Or is it something greater? Something bigger, something that the established day pointed to whose reality is found in Christ. Look at verse 3 of chapter 4, still in Hebrews, "For we who have believed, DO enter into that rest." Now just in case you don't believe that the author here is talking about the Sabbath day, and its purpose as a sign of this reality of a salvation rest in Christ, verse 4, of chapter 4 he says it explicitly. "For he has spoken in a certain place of the seventh day in this way: And God rested on the seventh day from all his works, and again in this place, they shall not enter my rest. Since therefore it remains that some must enter it, and those to whom it was first preached did not enter because of disobedience he again designates a certain day and says, Today, after such a long time, as it has been said, Today if you will hear his voice, do not harden your hearts. For if Joshua had given them rest, then he would not afterward have spoken of a different day. There remains therefore a rest for the people of God, For he who has entered his rest has himself also ceased from his works as God did from his."

So you can see, he is talking about the 7th day, the Sabbath rest, but the simple reading of scripture shows that setting aside a day of the week was never the point, Israel did this, in fact the breaking of the 7th day was met with harsh punishment, even death, yet the author here says that that to those who were given that sign, of the sabbath day, did not truly enter because of their disobedience. So that brings up the question, what does this mean for us Christians today? Israel observed the 7th day Sabbath, yet as scripture says...did not enter that rest. Again verse 3, of chapter 4, says For we who have believed do enter that rest.

And again, verse 10, “for he who has entered His rest has himself ceased from his works as God did from his.” So extracting this simple understanding from what the author is saying, we can now apply it by asking this question....since those who have believed, have entered into that rest, do we as believers need to keep a physical Sabbath day?

To answer that question we can look to scripture again, in Romans 14, verse 5. “One person esteems one day above another, and other esteems every day alike, let each be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it to the Lord, and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe it. He who eats, eats to the Lord, and who who does not eat, to the Lord he does not eat and gives God thanks.”

If the Sabbath day, was a hard and fast ritualistic day that must be held as Christians, Paul would not have written those verses, but instead he is talking about the freedom we have in Christ and our attitude that we must have toward one another. That just because one may not be where you are in your faith and understanding, does not mean that the other person is not a brother or sister, and we should instead, by love, instruct and teach to bring about understanding. So then, many of the variation or differences that people believe can stem from an improper interpretation or understanding of the bible. There also tends to be the issue of resting on what is considered already established and an old traditional way of thinking to which there are many benefits of that, but we must always be open minded when approaching scripture that we seek out what scripture is saying and not lay upon it our own understanding based on already established understanding. The reason why it is always good to challenge our understanding of scripture, to pursue truth, and seek understanding is that we are all fallible humans, with limited understanding and knowledge and entire denominations are belief systems are established on unquestioned settled interpretations of the bible.

The Catholic church being one example of this, having the same bible we have, but built on generations of traditions and standing on the shoulders of men who began with mistaken understanding and interpretation they have strayed away from scripture and have created something entirely different. That was the entire point of Martin Luther in his challenge to the Catholic Church. He let scripture speak for itself and saw that their understanding of salvation was wrong and called them out on it. The church branded him as a heretic for going outside of the already established understanding, bringing in something new, challenging the authority's understanding of the bible. This is why it is important that we as believers do not become so rigid in our thinking we are always right that we end up making the same mistakes as the catholic church, who now isn't even recognizable from the time of Martin Luther because its entire belief system is built upon false pretenses and bad interpretation and misunderstanding of scripture. I think the best examples that we have of this in the protestant faith is our arminian, and our reformed brethren, both on the opposite ends of the spectrum as far as the understanding of the method and mode of salvation, but each have taken the teachings of those who came before and believe that what they believe is settled doctrine. The arminian in their freewill belief of salvation, and the reformed in their continuation of the law keeping.

Both of these thing are addressed quite openly and plainly in scripture, but neither seem to have eyes to see because they appeal to authority's which came before instead of allowing scripture to speak for itself. Resting upon the understanding of those who have come before, and having those understandings enshrined as something to never be questioned or challenged. It seems that often times these errors arise simply because of an over complication in understanding of scripture. In an attempt to prove a preconceived point, sometimes requires a complicated answer, when the reality is that scripture often times just needs to be understood through simplicity.

An example of that over complication, is trying to make the law fit for Christians today, to do so the law minded individual must create a division in the Mosaic law, otherwise the temple rituals and sacrifices would still apply. So it creates this sort of complicated understanding of a division between ceremonial, and moral law, a division that never occurs in the bible, in fact the opposite is taught in scripture. James wrote in his letter to the christian brothers and sisters, that if you fail in one point of law keeping, you are guilty of it all. This is not a division, but sees the law as a whole entire unit, unless you want to complicate the simple statement by saying he means only the moral law...but then again, there is no proof that is what he means, and is an idea of those trying to fit their own understanding upon scripture then to let the text speak plainly for itself.

So, why do I say all this, why have I brought this all up? I don't think that this is anything that is a new idea or understanding to any of us, but I bring it up mainly I guess as a reminder and a challenge for myself, as well as everyone else that we must always be mindful to test scripture with scripture, and to let the simplicity of its meaning I think rule our understanding of it. This does not mean we can't dig deep into the text, but we must always be aware of our own bias' and try to simply let the text speak for itself. This all came from looking at the book of Romans here, what we have been studying for the past few months now, and just being in awe that so many can read this, and still walk away with a free will understanding of salvation, likewise with Hebrews and Galatians, or even the book of James that one can read them and come away with an idea that we must follow the ten commandments as our rule and guild as believers. As I was thinking about that, it became all the more apparent where the breakdown of understanding happens. First and foremost is the absolute necessity of a spirit guided mind and understanding to even see such rich and glorious things of God, and second is the default position of just resting on what came before and never challenging to understand or dig in to see, but instead just blindly accept ideas and beliefs as settled.

In the scientific world, there should always be testing, and retesting, and more testing to seek to prove a truth, and as we learn and grow in understanding those who do such studies can narrow down things which are true, and things which they may have been mistaken about. So to it is with scripture, we should be testing our understanding, to what scripture itself says and if we find ourselves at odds with what we find, instead of making up some unfounded doctrines to make our understanding fit, we need to simply conform to what is being said. With that in mind, I want to read chapter 9 this morning, by way a recap and refresher since its been a few weeks that we were here, but also just so we can rejoice and taste the simplicity of what Paul is saying here, as he points to a God who is just, and holy, mighty, and gracious, and implicitly in control of all things. Starting at verse 1,

“I tell the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and continual grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my countrymen according to the flesh, who are Israelites, to whom obtain the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, and the promises, of whom are the fathers and from whom, according to the flesh, Christ came, who is over all, the eternally blessed God.” These first few verses are fairly self evident, Paul struggles and it pains him of the reality that his fellow Israelites rejected the Messiah, having been given every advantage, having the law and the prophets foretelling of the one who was coming, who, has now come and they reject him. So he goes on, and makes a conclusion which has profound doctrinal implications, seeing therefore the rejection of the Messiah by Israel, he says, in verse 6, “But it is not as though the word of God has taken no effect, for they are not all Israel who are of Israel, nor are they all children because they are the seed of Abraham; but, “in Issac your seed shall be called.” That is those who are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God; but the children of promise are counted as the seed.”

The simple reading of this text is Paul's understanding of what it means to truly be Israel, and to truly be a child of God. IT is not a physical state, but a spiritual, one which is open to all peoples. The physical nation of Israel is therefore a metaphor for the spiritual, and all those who believe in the gospel of Christ, are members of this spiritual Israel, and it is they who are the true inheritors of the Abrahamic promises. God has not failed as it would so easily appear with Israel's rejection of him, but rather as Paul simply concludes, they are not all Israel, who are Israel, therefore the true Israel is something far greater which we all who believe are a part of.

Verse 9, "For this is the word of promise." Paul is going to tell us now, this promise that was given to Abraham and how it applies to us who believe. "For this is the word of promise, AT this time I will come and Sarah will have a son. And not only this, but when Rebecca also had conceived by one man, even our father Isaac for the children not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of him who calls, it was said to her the older shall serve the younger, as it is written, Jacob I have loved, Esau I have hated." The plain reading of this text destroys any understanding of a free will salvation model, works are taken out of the equation, there is no keeping of a law or tradition, or ordinances, or creeds that will save you. You are saved, simply, and only by believing upon Christ, and that belief is simply given to you, by faith which is a gift given from God, unless you have been enabled, you shall not believe. Which points back to Israel's rejection of the Messiah, it was not given that they should believe so that the purpose and will of God may be complete, that Christ would die, on the cross to save his people from all nations. And God's election is not determined on some future knowledge as some would imply to try to explain away this text, it is simply by his will, for his purpose. So now, in comes the skeptic in verse 14, Paul asks the rhetorical question, "What shall we say then, is there unrighteousness with God? Certainly Not! For he says to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion, so it is not of him who wills, or of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy. "

Again, it is not by anything that we can, or will, or have done, but it is only by Christ and Christ alone through the elective will of God that any come to him. And this is just, and this is fair, for without the electing will of God and his sovereign intervention all of humanity would reject him just as Israel did. They had all the evidences, all the promises, and prophesies, yet they rejected he who was the substance of all of those things. If they, who were given every advantage to see and believe, rejected the promised Messiah, it just goes to show that outside of God's sovereign intervention the world has no hope of righteousness before God. Verse 17, Paul gives an example of how God works his purpose through his electing will, that not only are his children chosen, but by his will even leaders and powers in this world are raised up to fulfill his purpose. "For the scripture says to Pharaoh, for this very purpose I have raised you up, that I may show my power in you, that my name may be declared in all the earth. Therefore he has mercy on whom he wills, and whom he wills he hardens." Again Pharaoh had Moses preaching to him of the sovereign mighty God, and Pharaoh even after seeing all the signs that were given, rejected and denied for it was not given to him to believe so that the purpose of God may stand. So, as Paul continues in verse 19 "You will say to me, Why does he still find fault? For who as resisted his will? But indeed oh man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, why have you made me like this? Does not the potter have the power of the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor? What if God wanting to show his wrath and to make his power known, endured with much long suffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction. And that he might make known his riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had prepared beforehand in glory, even us whom he called, not of the Jews only but also of the gentiles."

Again you can not read this and come away thinking that you have any power in your own fate. God is in ultimate control over the fate of each individual human, whether a vessel of wrath, or a vessel of mercy, both are Gods to do with as he wills, and both serve his purpose in his dealing with humanity. Many it would seem avoid these passages because they see them as difficult and not understandable simply for because of the fact that they are approaching the with their own preconceived ideas and they do not understand how this fits into their belief system. So, instead of challenging their belief system, they hold fast to it though it contradicts the plain and simply reading of the text and seek to explain it away, or say that this is too complicated and not understandable. This is why it is so important that when we approach scripture we do so fully aware of our own preconceived ideas and bias, and that we should always be measuring those to what is being said.

This is something that is often a part of my thinking and process of biblical study, in the standard framework of biblical interpretation, determining who is speaking, and who is being spoken too, this is where I find commentaries, and the internet to be very helpful which gives a sense of the purpose and point that the author is seeking to make in his writings. Then, with that in mind, I look at the sort of, simple reading of the passage what is being said, and how does it apply to us today. I have often felt that preachers and scholars sometimes can over complicate scripture, and we see that I think in the examples I gave earlier with those who come to scripture to make it fit their own ideas and understandings. Taking a simple reading of the text, and coming at all of it with the mindset of seeking an understanding that gives Christ all the glory, and takes any glory or power away from man that they may think they have are the 2 basic ideas I take when looking at scripture. The entire purpose of the bible is God's revelation of himself to us, so that we may come to believe and understand him, and grow in faith and become ever closer to him. So, I hope that this was helpful this morning, I know its not anything profound, or new for most but it is an important subject I think to visit as a reminder now and again.

The Christian faith is full of people seeking to use this bible as a proof text of their own thoughts, we see this so much in the sort of cultural christian conservative movement, and we need to guard ourselves against such and rather let scripture speak for itself and learn to dig in to it to see what it is saying instead of seeing how it may support what we think. Yet, we must also remain open minded enough to accept new ideas, which may not necessarily be new if they are scriptural, but new to us as we learn and grow more in this faith. There are many out there, like I was, who have never heard the gospel from the sovereign grace perspective, to them, this well established old doctrinal belief is new to them, and they then have the responsibility to test out their belief to what scripture teaches. Likewise with the law minded individual when confronted with the ideas of new covenant theology, or progressive covenantalism, or what ever label you want to put on it it must all be weighed against scripture, and we must be willing to put aside our bias and attempt to let scripture speak for itself, a task that is often easier said than done, but a necessary one none the less if we want to grow in our faith and understanding.