

Text Selection and Interpretation

As we are beginning today, let us review some major points from the last few lessons. A sermon should be about one thing. What is the one thing? A subject and its complements. What is the big idea of a sermon? The main idea of a passage applied to a fallen condition focus (FCF). Somebody was asking me just before we began if there is only one possible FCF for a given passage. No. The FCF is the way we identify and speak about the burden of the passage, but there may be many ways of wording it, and there may be many subsets within the main idea. So it is the main idea of a passage applied to an FCF rather than the FCF of a given passage.

How does one develop an FCF? You are identifying the burden of a message. Are all FCF's sins? No. It may be the burden of the text that is a sin, a wrong that is being corrected, or it may be an aspect of our fallen condition, like grief or uncertainty, that is not a sin. But always it is part of our fallen condition that God is addressing. So it is identifying the burden of the message—it may be a sin or it may not be.

What are indications that a message is pre-sermon? It is truth without application. It is just information. Information without application yields frustration. We are not ministers of information alone; we are ministers of transformation. So, a message is pre-sermon if it is truth without application. When you are listening to other pastors to learn from them, here are some helpful things to keep in mind. How are they portraying *logos* to you? Now again, what is *logos*? It is the verbal content, and it includes the logic. It is not just the words themselves; it is the meaning of the words being presented in a logical form. How is *logos* being presented to you by the preacher? What things do preachers do that communicate *logos*? Okay, the outline, the points themselves, are an organizational scheme. That is one way. So, organization is one dimension of *logos*. Is body language *logos*? Surely if the manner contradicts the message we will hear the manner as the message. Does that make sense? So, certainly body language has something to do with communicating content. That is, verbal content is not just the words coming out of the mouth. The way they are being expressed is also part of the verbal content. It is not just what is said but how it is said that is the verbal content. Now, the phrase, “how it is said,” what do we usually think of that most applying to? If not *logos*, what? *Pathos*. How it is said. But these are not ironclad categories. In fact, we will begin to see more and more how much they blend. *Logos* you know is the words said and even things like, “Can I hear what is being said?” It includes the organization, “How am I getting the verbal content?”

How is *pathos* communicated to you? We already said body language may be one way. What are other ways that *pathos* is communicated to you? The emotions—how do we communicate emotions to one another? By gestures, tone of voice, and facial expression. This is what the speech communicators call facial animation. When we are very serious, particularly men in this society, our faces tend to freeze. For example, I may say, “I am really happy about this,” but I am not smiling. The best way to get facial animation is to actually smile. If you plant a smile, your face will start moving. When we are very serious, we often get very flat faced. So, tone of voice, gesture (manner reflecting message, manner being consistent to the message), and facial expression.

Now, how do we present, and how do the preachers you are listening to communicate *ethos* to you? This is the tough one and yet the most important one. How do preachers communicate *ethos*? *Ethos* has two components: credibility and compassion (C and C). So, if I speak of personal experience, what does that do to either credibility or compassion? It is the credibility of “I know what you are living through.” That is part of *ethos*. What about compassion? Can personal experience relate compassion? If my personal experience is making fun of other people, it is not going to relate compassion. But if it is showing

empathy, sympathy, and concern for others, personal experience can be part of *ethos*. What else goes into communicating *ethos*? Transparency (we will talk a little later about redemptive transparency). This means not simply saying, “Feel sorry for me,” but, “I know what you are going through, and God has provided a help.” What else helps with *ethos*? Credibility and compassion. What communicates credibility? Part of it is the way the pastor lives his life. That is not even what happens in the pulpit, is it? Your impression of a preacher is largely based on knowing him outside the pulpit or knowing what he brings into the sermon from outside the pulpit. That is why we have to think that preaching is not just words. It is life presenting words. “Truth poured through personality” is Philip Brooks’ famous statement. *Ethos* is your awareness or somehow what is projected through your life, not just what you are saying at the time. What does organization do for credibility? If someone is not organized, he is not credible. He does not appear to know what he is talking about, or worse, he does not appear to care whether you are able to understand it. He does not seem to care about his listeners if he is not organized. That surprises people usually. I think of organization as just being a logical thing I have to go through. But it is actually one of the primary means by which we communicate care for the listeners.

Thus, now we will tie the categories together. Intellectual integrity can certainly be part of *logos*—does the argument hold water? But it is also part of *ethos*—is this logical, is it embracing what you know would be questions a listener would have? Or are you ignoring the questions, are you ignoring the big issues? Are you speaking about what you want to know but ignoring what everybody knows is the big elephant in the room, the hard questions? Have you really engaged with intellectual integrity what people know is going on?

Now, I am not going to continue going down the path, but I want to get you ready because you have seen two things happen, I hope. The categories start to blend, each kind of depends on the others. *Pathos* is part of *logos*, *logos* is part of *pathos*, *logos* is part of *ethos*, *ethos* is part of *logos*. The second thing you start to realize, even as you are evaluating other preachers, is that you are not evaluating only what happens in the pulpit. *Ethos* takes you to a wider world. Because *ethos* is connected to all those other things, it becomes the reason why we cannot say, “I will be a great preacher if they just give me 40 hours a week in the office to develop these great masterpiece sermons.” That would not be a very great preaching ministry. If it is not life on life, the words do not mean very much. Let us pray, and we will go into today’s lesson.

Father, You beautifully unfold Your Word in our task in so many ways, reminding us how we live is part of what we say and yet reminding us at the same time that Your Spirit has given us what to say so that we are not dependent on our authority or our thoughts. And yet Father, we know we must have this because our thoughts are sometimes a great challenge. We recognize for our nation right now there is a major storm bearing down on the southern states. As we struggle in thought with this, at one point we recognize it is evidence of Your power and sovereignty, and at the same time we recognize that people will be hurt, and we have trouble reconciling this to our understanding of You. At one level we can logically talk about it being a fallen world, the consequence of sin ravishing in so many ways. But ultimately we will still at times struggle to make sense of how it goes on and what its purpose could be. Your ways are beyond ours. And Father, if we only relied on our logic for the interpretation of our circumstances, we would be at a loss. But You have shown us something else. Beyond our circumstances You have shown us Your character. Through the work of Jesus Christ, we have seen a love that is undeniable and eternal. It is working its purposes out in ways that we in the moment might say looked wrong. Father, by so displaying Your character to us even on this day, would You hold our hearts close to Your own. Do this that not only would we be assured of all that You are doing for our good, but that we might also be able to help others, too. Grant us a great vision of Your Son, that we might be

adequate heralds of the mercy that is in Him. We ask for Your blessing even as we prepare for this day. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Today we will talk about learning some basic tools and rules for both selecting and interpreting text. If we are going to be preaching from the Bible, ultimately we have to select some texts and then interpret them. Now, here is a particular text that was interpreted. G. Campbell Morgan, one of the great preachers from the last century, did not preach this sermon, but he talked about once hearing it. It was a sermon based on 2 Samuel 9:13. Here is the text: "And Mephibosheth lived in Jerusalem, because he always ate at the king's table, and he was crippled in both feet." This is the text about Mephibosheth, taken to David's table even though Mephibosheth was lame. The preacher began the sermon this way, "My brethren, we see here tonight first, the doctrine of human depravity: Mephibosheth was lame. Second, we see the doctrine of total depravity: he was lame in both feet." (You are supposed to chuckle at this point). "Third, we see the doctrine of justification, for he dwelt in Jerusalem. Fourth, we see the doctrine of adoption because he ate at the king's table. And fifth, we see the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints because he ate at the king's table continually." Is that what the text means? Now we must say, somewhere in the Bible those things are said. But this is classic eisegesis: importing upon the text what the text does not mean. Now somewhere the Bible does say those things, but it is not what this text says. The goal of expository preaching is to say what God says, to interpret the text correctly.

To do that we need to have certain tools available to us. I want to talk to you first about some basic tools for Bible study. What are some basic tools for Bible study? The basic tool that I would encourage you to have in your library available to you as you prepare your studies is a good study Bible. A study Bible is one that does not merely have the text of Scripture but information about the text. This information can be found at the beginnings of chapters, in footnotes, textual commentary, indices, maps, and all kinds of things that go in a study Bible. There is much information about the text in a study Bible. If you open up to the book of Philippians, it will tell you it was written by Paul. It will tell you the year it was written. It will tell you where Paul was when he wrote, which is away from Philippi. It will tell you who the Philippians were, what their town was like, what they were struggling with, and what was going on in the church.

Now, for this information I do not have to go to many commentaries, not yet. This is basic information that will be in virtually any good study Bible. The one I have here is the *Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible*, which has most of the notes and commentary put together by Reformed and evangelical scholars. It uses the text of the New International Version (NIV). Many of you will be using the NIV, or your churches do. The *New Geneva Study Bible* originally had these notes, and it was in the New King James Version. The notes for the new Reformation Study Bible were originally designed for the NIV. But Zondervan at that point did not release the copyright for the use of those notes with the NIV. So they were attached to the New King James Version. Some years later, people got together and said, "You know, we still have these notes for the NIV." At that point, rights were obtained, and they were attached to the NIV study bible. Thus, while there are some editorial differences, the study notes for both the New King James and the NIV study bible are pretty much the same. That is very helpful.

Other commonly used study Bibles are the NIV, which is Zondervan's own study Bible. If you only have so much money to spend on a study Bible, this one gives you lots of information at your fingertips right with the text. And when you are saying, "Am I really off base here in where I am going," usually the notes at the bottom of the page will give you a lot of information of whether you are off base in your initial interpretation. They are not exhaustive! They are not like an extensive commentary. But they give you good hints and a good sketch of most of the information that will be background that you will need for almost any text. The Ryrie Study Bible is used much in the United States. The theological

perspective of the Ryrie Study Bible is dispensational. It is evangelical and Bible believing, but it is dispensational. The HarperCollins Study Bible is also much used in the United States. Its theological perspective is liberal critical. So it would not accept the inerrancy of Scripture, and much of the notes will reflect that. It has much good scholarship, in terms of intellectual integration and credibility. But it does not, in our view, have an accurate view or a truthful understanding of what the Scriptures say. A study Bible is certainly going to be something you will want on your shelf that will be very, very helpful. This is probably the first tool that most preachers refer to when they are preparing a sermon. They will look in their study Bible and get perspective that way.

The second most used tool is a concordance. Looking at a text, how do you use a concordance? What do you do with the text when you are looking at a concordance? Why would you use it? You would use it for a word study. You might say, “Here is this word—I wonder where else that is used. I wonder how it is used in other places in the Bible.” You begin to do a word study through the use of a concordance. If you are a preacher and a scholar, that is what you say you use a concordance for—for looking at how a word is used elsewhere in the Bible. But how do most of us use concordances? What do we do? Particularly our generation. We have a Scripture in our mind, but we cannot remember where it is in the Bible. And so what do we do? We look up the word, and we find the text.

Now two of the main English versions of concordances, available up to this generation, are Young’s and Strong’s. I am using a Young’s. They are both dependable and Bible believing in their approach, but they have differences. Young’s groups words according to their original language root. If you look up the word “love,” it will group all of the references to love that come from the Greek *agape*. Then it will also group all the references to love that come from the Greek *filio*. It will group them according to their original language root. Strong’s groups them according to their English usage. So it will put all the love words together, right in a row. It does not take care to say, “This usage is from this Greek word for love, and that is from another Greek word for love.” So people who have had some training in the original language tend to prefer Young’s. People who are English based only typically prefer Strong’s. Now, Strong’s has a way of compensating for the fact that it does not group itself according to the original language roots. That is the number system. Next to the English word, depending on what edition of Strong’s you have, it might have the Greek word listed by it. But the modern versions will have a numbering system after the word. That numbering system is connected to a number of resources that you can buy. You can then figure out what the Greek root of a word is, where that word is used elsewhere, etc. The numbering system will actually take you to the dictionary references of those words in *Vine’s New Testament Word Dictionary*. So, you can read a lot about the Greek background of those words. Again, when you have a little of original language background, Young’s tends to be more efficient. It will tell you the original language background and group the words according to that. But Strong’s gives you the same ability to work through an English based system by using their numbering system.

Now, that is mostly what the last generation would have depended on. There is something else going on today, which has nothing to do with those hard-bound books. Many of you will use you computers as concordances. You will use something like the concordance for the English Standard Version (ESV) that is computerized. Some of you will use software like Logos, which is probably the most popular. Some of you will use more technical things like Gramcord, which, by the way, is quite expensive. There are ways to use computer searches. I would guess I now do most of my word searches on the computer. For the first 15 or 20 years of my ministry, I used my Young’s, but I hardly ever use it anymore. It gathers dust on my shelf. Now, almost always, I do computer searches and use computer concordances. I use Gramcord, but that is because the seminary owns it. I recognize it is quite expensive. My guess is

most of you will use either Bible Works or Logos. Some of these companies come and go. I think the premier one that has lasted has been Logos. Most seminarians use that.

Beyond concordances, the next thing that is very common for use is a topical Bible. A concordance allows you to search the Bible for word use, where else in the Bible that word appears. A topical Bible allows you to search for where else a topic appears in the Bible. I have a *Nave's Topical Bible*. If I look up "kingdom" in it, it will tell me the various places that the topic of kingdom is addressed in the Bible. This is an exhaustive Nave's, by the way. It does not just list the reference, but it actually gives me all the verses that are in that reference. For me, that is a very fast way to study. If I am giving a lesson on intercessory prayer, I can look up "prayer, subset intercessory," and the Nave's gives me most of the major places in the Bible that intercessory prayer appears. I can do a quick study of that by just going through a topical Bible. Nave's is the most used one in the English language. I do not know that there is a good computer program that does this yet, that actually deals topically with such issues.

Similar to Nave's, but somewhat different, is the *Thompson Chain Reference Bible*. It deals with a topic as it appears in the biblical text. If you are going through Genesis and you come across something about the curse, the *Thompson Chain Reference Bible* will take you to the next place in the Bible where something about the curse appears. As you keep turning, it keeps referencing you further. It just links the chain of that topic through the Bible. When you get all the way to the back of the *Thompson Chain Reference*, it will list all together what that chain has been. It will give you a fairly extensive study of some of those things at the back when it links the chain together and says, "This is where "kingdom" appears..." and lists them all together. The *Thompson Chain Reference* is more methodical than Nave's, but Nave's, by far, is the more abbreviated and quick way of doing it. But what I do sometimes, and I guess that you will do it too, is, in studying a text I come across something that I did not even recognize was chained somewhere. And the *Thompson Chain Reference* tells you, "By the way, this is also over here." Well, I better look there and see what is going on there, too. It leads you forward into that kind of study. So the study tools we have covered so far are study Bibles, concordances, and topical Bibles. These are all various ways we can study a text.

Now, a fourth way we can study a text is by looking at various translations. We look at the text we are studying, and we begin to look at it in various translations. I am not asking you to do this, but this is actually a little book that has about the New Testament in 26 translations. So you can compare 26 translations in the New Testament. I do not have an Old Testament version—I cannot imagine how big such a book would be. This is in very little type, and it gives me 26 translations that I can compare as I am going through the New Testament. I hardly ever do it, as it is overwhelming. But there are certain translations that I will almost always compare. Most of the churches in which I preach these days are using NIV. Because of that, most of the time I prepare my sermons using the NIV. Sometimes, however, I go to churches that still use the King James Version. So, if I am going and I know that I will be in a church that uses King James, I will certainly compare those translations. The ESV is kind of working its way into the evangelical and Reformed world. My sense is that it is more concentrated in seminary use right now than it is in wide church use. However, these days, if I am preparing something in the NIV, I almost always check it in the ESV. I almost always do that these days because I recognize that enough people may be looking at the ESV that they will be saying, "Wait, that is not what my Bible says." I want to be able to deal with that in the sermon. But that is not the main reason I compare translations. The main reason I compare translations is so that I will begin to be able to pinpoint very precisely where there are issues in the text. I will be able to note the different places where this translation kind of went that way and this translation kind of went the other way.

A student brought to me a question yesterday as we were working on a sermon together. He said, "In the NIV it says, 'As Jesus was walking on the water, he passed by the disciples.' In the ESV it says, 'He intended to pass by the disciples.' There may be something really going on there; is it just incidental passing by? Or did he purposely intend to pass by?" If I see that strong a difference, I know I will have to look it up in the Greek (or Hebrew for the Old Testament). I know that I have to find out what is going on here. There is a significant enough difference in the translations that it draws my attention. That is what I call "pinpoint exegesis." Exegesis is where we use the original language to determine what a text means. There are times when I love to dig into a text and be able to translate the whole thing and work it through, and that is great. But there are times when I cannot do that. And it is when I compare translations that I learn where it is that I have to spend my exegetical nickels. I say, "I can really tell there is an issue here. I better research so I know what I am talking about." Comparing translations helps me do that.

As you think about various translations, I want to caution you about what I consider to be sometimes senseless and unnecessary debates. If you were trained in InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, if you did lots of inductive Bible studies on college campuses, what translation did you typically use? You probably used the New American Standard Bible (NAS). Why? It is the most literal of the translations. Kind of in lockstep, it follows the Greek and Hebrew as much as it can, even in word order. So it is the most literal of the translations. And you must say, "That is very helpful when you are doing inductive Bible study and trying to do a very close reading of the text." Now, while that is very helpful for Bible students, for whom is it sometimes difficult to read? For the average person in the pew. Now what did we just say? It has got a great strength; it is probably the most literal of the translations. But what is its weakness? Sometimes its language is very wooden and not easy to follow. They do not recognize that no matter where you translate something you are going to have to do some certain idiomatic translations and change. One of the idioms in Hebrew for a man getting angry is to say, "His nose glows." Now, if I just translated it, "His nose glows," what will everybody with an English Bible do? They will say, "What? Has he got a cold? His nose glows?" So what am I going to do? I take that literal translation and put it in my idiom. I will say, "He got angry. He got very mad." I will put it in an English idiom to make sense of it. Now, the New American Standard (NAS) will do that too. But the Bible that takes the most care, is the most concerned to look at the original translation and put it in the dynamic equivalence of how we speak, is the NIV. The NIV took great care to get dynamic equivalence. The strength of this is that it is very readable. As I recall, they were going for a fourth grade reading level, so that fourth graders would be able to read it. That is its great strength. What then becomes its weakness? Dynamic equivalence is not always very literal. I have all these other study tools so that I know precisely what is being said, and, if I feel the dynamic equivalence needs to be elaborated on, I can do that.

The ESV is kind of in between the NAS and the NIV. The ESV is not an original translation. There was a translation that preceded it. Do you know what that translation was? It was the Revised Standard Version (RSV). The RSV was translated by liberal scholars who were trying to update the King James. The great advantage of the King James in English culture is that, because it has been around for so many years, it is the version of the Bible that most people are familiar with. What the RSV tried to do was to update the King James and keep that majesty of language, almost the poetry of it. The trouble was, they were liberal scholars, and they put in liberal scholarship at times. Some of the classic places where this happened are passages like Isaiah 7:14. Here they did not say that a virgin would be with child. Instead of "virgin," they said "a young girl." They would not affirm the virgin birth prophecy of Isaiah 7:14. Now, that is pretty serious. After the RSV had been around for a number of years, some evangelical scholars said, "We know the King James is still used in this culture, and we know the RSV tries to maintain the majesty of that style. So we want to take the RSV, fix the liberal emendations, and come at it with a Bible-believing approach." That is what the ESV does. It tries to maintain the historic majesty

of the English versions while at the same time using a Bible-believing approach. I love the ESV, I will tell you. Now, part of the reason I do is because I was raised on the King James. If you ask me for a Bible verse, it always comes to my mind in the King James. It will not, probably for your generation, but for mine it does. This is why so many of these study tools are helpful, because many of these were at least initially based on the King James. Thus the ESV is very helpful for maintaining majesty and accuracy. The ESV does majesty and accuracy well.

Here is where the debate comes. People will say, “Those NIV scholars, they were so concerned for dynamic equivalence that they were not even concerned to be accurate! In fact, what they did is just of the devil. Now, some major publishers have published books that actually call the NIV satanic. There are those who say that those who strive for dynamic equivalence rather than a more literal translation are serving the devil. And there are churches even today who are “King James only.” Did you know that? There are even churches that talk about the Saint James Bible. When the Pilgrims came to the United States, who was in power? Who was persecuting Christians of their denomination so that they had to flee? King James. He was no saint. He was trying to establish his own authority over the Church of England. For this reason, he asked scholars to translate a Bible for him that would not be dependent on the Roman Catholic Church. Those scholars happened to be Bible-believing, and they did a great translation that has survived the centuries. But the man for whom they were working was not a very nice man. And there has been much scholarship that has continued to unfold, which is why the King James is now outdated, though it is still wonderful.

There are things that make each of these translations helpful, if they are translated by Bible-believing scholars. Some of the greatest attacks that come against Bible translations come against the paraphrased Bibles like *Living Letters*. Do the paraphrased Bibles help certain people, and can they be helpful to you? Who are the paraphrased Bibles designed to help? People with very low Bible literacy, and sometimes children. Eugene Peterson, on the train back and forth to Chicago, was translating for his children. Then it was printed and sold hundreds of millions of copies, but he had intended it for his children. Do you ever tell a Bible story to your children in simpler language than the Bible says it? Are you evil because you did? You had a reason, right? This is what I want you to understand. Every one of these Bible-believing translations has a purpose. Now, if you make it cross its purpose, then it will not be useful to you. But if you begin to weigh strengths and weaknesses, considering who you are talking to and what the purpose is, then it can help. Do you know when I sometimes use a paraphrased Bible? When I want to get the gist of a lot of material at once, and I really do not want to wade through the meticulous details. I just want to be reminded, what did Job’s friends say to him? And I know that will run across about 25 chapters, so I want to skim that material. Sometimes a paraphrased Bible will help me do that. I will not preach from a paraphrased Bible, but if I want to get a lot of material in front of me, they help. Thus comparing various translations is one way to help our interpretation of a passage.

Another way to help our interpretation after we have looked at various translations is to look at Bible dictionaries. Who was Artaxerxes, after all? When did he rule? What was his language? Who did he interact with? I may need to look up “Artaxerxes” in a Bible dictionary. These are just like normal dictionaries except that they take us through Bible terms, places, and people. Thus if I look up, for example, “mediator,” I will find how the term is developed in the Bible. I can also look up “incarnation” or the location of Samaria and the kinds of people who lived there.

As a side note, a student has asked about the Textus Receptus debate. This is a topic for another class, but let me summarize it briefly. The King James and the New King James are based on what is called the Textus Receptus, or the Byzantine text. There is an argument that this was the main base for translation that existed in the church up until the time of the King James translation. Did God, then,

providentially preserve the Byzantine text or the Textus Receptus, thus making it the main version of the Greek text that the church should depend on? Do you hear the argument? If God providentially preserved it and the church used it for all those centuries, is it not the one we should most depend on? That is the summary of the debate. The Textus Receptus is certainly one of the most dependable of the Greek texts of the New Testament available to us. But it has its problems, too. I think most evangelical, Bible-believing scholars are willing to say the Textus Receptus may be a starting point, but it cannot be the end point. There are other things that need to inform us. We now have thousands more Greek texts of the New Testament that we have discovered since the time of the King James translation, which had only the Textus Receptus available for use. This would seem to indicate that we should use all the information available to us and not just ignore it, saying, "This is what the church did for centuries, so we will not learn any more from these other texts." My main problem with the argument for depending on the Textus Receptus is that it primarily depends on the Western tradition. It is saying that only what the Western church used is dependable and does not consider other major, cultural uses of the Bible. This implies that they do not have anything to say to us. It is a raging debate, although it is a little quieter now than it was 10 or 15 years ago.

Again, a Bible dictionary is a tool you use to look up people, places, or terms from the Bible that you do not know. Another tool you will use are lexical aids. Lexical or grammatical aids. I have here *Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich*, which is basically a dictionary of Greek words, just as we have a dictionary for English words. Of course, there are similar dictionaries for Hebrew, Chaldee, and Aramaic. There are various lexicons for those languages. There are also grammars. There are tools in many of the computer programs we mentioned earlier that will help you do exegetical, lexical study on the computer. You can look up a word in a particular verse and find out the original Greek (or Hebrew) word, the tense, the gender, where it is used elsewhere, etc. There are wonderful aids out there, and often Bible software can help you do a lot of searching as well as provide grammatical aids.

The next, big category is commentaries. Commentaries do not depend on you doing the research. Someone else has done all the work, going through all these exegetical tools and historical patterns. They have now put together their own commentary on that text. There are many commentaries, but people will comment from their theological perspectives. Thus one of the things it is important to have is a guide to biblical commentaries. I have one that our faculty has put together (accessible from Covenant Seminary's library website) for English commentaries, but there are others available that you can buy. In the footnotes of the new edition of my book *Christ Centered Preaching* is information about the various publishers who publish other guides to English commentaries. These guides tell you the theological bent of the commentator, whether he is dispensational, liberal, evangelical, Reformed, Bible-believing, or not. By getting a guide to theological commentaries, you will get a feel for the various commentaries. You can get commentaries based on the Greek or Hebrew text or on an English (or other language) translation of the text. There are many kinds of commentaries. You can get whole-Bible commentaries, which try to give you a brief comment on nearly everything in the Bible. I have one by Eerdmans. It is a whole-Bible commentary, and this particular one from Eerdmans is done by evangelicals. Eerdmans is a little awkward as a publisher because sometimes they publish books by evangelicals and sometimes they do not. More often in recent years, they do not. There are some solely evangelical publishers, such as Baker or Crossway. If you get a whole-Bible commentary from one of them, you can be fairly certain that it is dependable information.

There are also single-book commentaries, those that look only at one book. I have one here on the Gospel of Luke. This commentary is from the series, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*. If you were looking at a commentary guide, you would find out that this is an evangelical, Bible-believing commentary set. This is a whole set, covering the whole New Testament and now most

of the Old Testament as well in its companion set, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*. If you are in the midst of seminary training, I would not encourage you at this point to go out and buy lots of commentaries. If you have a theological library available to you, I suggest that you become accustomed to using many different commentaries from the library as you exegete texts and prepare sermons for your classes. You will find that some commentaries are very much based on the original texts. They give you essentially commentary on the Greek or Hebrew text. Some commentaries are very scholarly and dense. They deal with the historic debates of that particular text. There are also homiletical commentaries. These do not so much deal with historic debates but rather focus on how you would preach the text.

Over time, as you use different commentaries to help you prepare sermons, you will discover which are most helpful to you. Of course, all these different categories blend to some degree. Even an English or other translation-based commentary will sometimes refer to the Greek or Hebrew, even a homiletical commentary may be scholarly at times, and even an academic commentary may give you hints for preaching. This is a spectrum, not firm categories. Recognizing that, you will find that certain commentators are ones you can use all the time. As you become familiar with the different commentaries, you will know better where to invest your money. Find out what the commentaries are like, use the commentary guides to get familiar with the different kinds. Become familiar with the tools that are available to you, and over time you will get a pretty fair understanding of their respective strengths and weaknesses. Amazon.com is a good place to get commentaries, and Christian Book Distributors (CBD) has both a hard copy catalogue and a website.

The last major category is topical books. These are books that deal with a particular topic, and the whole book deals with that topic. I have a book here by one of our former professors, Dr. Sanderson, called *The Fruit of the Spirit*. In it he only deals with Galatians 5. It is an entire book just on one portion of a chapter. Thus you can get very deep into the issues surrounding Galatians chapter 5 on the fruit of the Spirit.

All these different categories are tools we have for studying a text. A student has asked, “Are commentaries from, say, the 1950s still useful for us?” Yes, as are commentaries from the 1750s and earlier. They are very useful. The older commentaries are typically more useful for homiletical insight and spiritual insight into what is going on. They often will be out-of-date in terms of scholarship. But they are typically very much up-to-date on what has happened up to that point. Sometimes a commentary from the 1950s can even be much better at describing the debate going on at that time or earlier than more recent commentaries are. We may be less interested in that now, but often times you will find issues that need to be dealt with that are not so much on the forefront of scholars’ attention at the present time. Older commentaries are useful more for spiritual and homiletical reasons than for academic study. Some of you may use Matthew Henry’s commentary, which is a classic. Almost everyone uses Matthew Henry’s commentary at some point. The reason is because his pastoral insights are so good. Barkley is another whose pastoral insights are good, though for both these authors their scholastic insights are often outdated.

What is the value of having a text that you preach from? Believe me, it is not for having a holy aura. It is because we want to say what God says. That is the reason we have a text—so that we will say what God says. Has it always been true in the history of preaching that preachers have texts they preach from? Absolutely not. There have been eras in church history during which doctrinal development more than textual commentary was the basis of preaching. But that was typically prior to the non-Christian consensus in which we now live. Years ago in some cultures, including our own, you could talk about a

doctrinal subject and people were able to follow you. At this point, people will want to know what your authority is for that. Thus having a text is pretty much where we are now.

So how do you select a text? There are some rules for selecting a text. When I first started preaching, I thought it was my obligation to take people to obscure and difficult texts. Why? Why do we feel that we really have to show them the tough material? Why do we do such things? To show them we know what we are talking about. Is that always what they need? Probably not. This creates certain problems. If you only go to difficult texts, what are you actually convincing people the Bible is like? It is a codebook that you cannot figure out without the decoder. By the way, who begins to serve as the decoder? You, the preacher. Your people begin to think they have to have you to be able to understand the Bible. But the goal of great preaching is to say, “You can read this. You can figure this out. Let me show you how you can.” The goal of great preaching is not to make people dependent on you; it is to make them dependent on the Word of God. Therefore you want to teach them how they can read it.

So we want to have some prohibitions and some warnings here. What are some things we want to not do? There are about four of these. Do not avoid familiar texts. Why would a text be familiar in the life of the church? Because it is important, because through the ages the church has highlighted it. If a text is familiar, it may be because it is important. Or it may be because it is very accessible, that is another reason. But to deny people what is important or accessible is actually damaging to them. If you look at what Christ was willing to speak, you will see that at times He spoke on very simple things—the birds of the air, Jonah—things people were familiar with. You can look at some of the great preachers from the past, such as Spurgeon. Spurgeon was the greatest Reformed preacher we know of in modern history. When people surveyed all his sermons, they found that his most commonly used texts were Zaccheus, the Prodigal Son, and Joshua. Remember, at that time he was often speaking to the affluent. He did not live in an affluent portion of the city, but there were affluent people who came into his church. Thus he was often speaking to affluent people who would come to his church in a working-class part of London. Why would Spurgeon, speaking to affluent people coming to a working-class church, keep reminding them of Zaccheus? Zaccheus made his living by taking advantage of people, and when he found out he was wrong he said he would restore what he had taken four times over. This would certainly be challenging. Talking to affluent people coming to a working-class church, he said, “Remember Zaccheus. He thought he would make his way by his wealth and his wiles, but he could not do it that way. That was not the way to God.” What about the Prodigal Son? Why would he keep preaching on the Prodigal Son over and over again? If you have messed up, there is a way back.

So far we have these two principles: do not search for obscure texts, and do not avoid familiar texts. The third rule is do not purposely avoid any Scripture. Paul said to the Ephesian elders, “I have not hesitated to communicate to you the whole counsel of God. Whatever was needful for you, I was willing to address.” By the way, if you begin to skip portions as you preach—if you are preaching through a book and then start skipping portions—what will everyone in your congregation do? They will go to that portion you skipped. They will want to know why you are skipping that. To begin to avoid passages is problematic, particularly in what we call consecutive preaching (we will get to that in a minute).

Finally, not only do we not purposely avoid any Scripture, but also we do not use spurious texts. What is a spurious text? One example is the passage about the woman caught in adultery. It is spurious because it is not in the original autograph. We have talked about the “autographer.” It is not what was originally in the Bible. It is not what the apostles or prophets wrote. So how did it get into our Bibles? Usually by scribal emendation, someone adding something in later centuries. One of the reasons we take the Textus Receptus and compare it to other translations is because we can look at the thousands of other texts to see if they match. We can take any major, historical document, look at one particular incident, and see if

any of the thousands of other textual documents have the same incident. If they do not, we typically think that was an emendation, something that was added in. There are some classic spurious texts, such as 1 John 5:7-8 (not included in most recent English translations), "There are these that bear witness in heaven: Father, Word, and Holy Spirit. And these three are one." Is not that a great explanation of the Trinity, right there in the Bible? Every Jehovah's Witness knows this text is spurious and is lying in wait for you to quote it. They will prove to you accurately that this was not in the original text. So if you are trying to prove the Trinity from 1 John 5:7-8, you are in big trouble. Now, is the Trinity attested to in other places in the Bible? Sure it is. But that is not the place to go. Mark 9:29 is another classic example of this: "This kind [of demon] can come out only by prayer and fasting." ("And fasting" is not included in most recent English translations). The phrase "and fasting" is not found in most or in the best manuscripts. Can you see how a scribe might be writing this down, come to the phrase, "This kind can come out only by prayer," and then a monk in a monastery adds "and fasting." Then all future scribes look at the addition and wonder if it was original or added, and so it slowly works its way in.

We can throw up all these problems, but how many words do we have questions about in the body of Scripture? One word in a thousand do we have any question about. If we were writing an essay for someone with 1000 words and there is one word you are unclear about, do you think the person will basically know what you are talking about? Our debate with the liberals is not over what the text says. You need to hear me say that. We all know what the text says, with very few exceptions. Our debate is over whether you believe what the text says. Do you hear the difference? We know what the text says. The debate is whether you will believe it and obey it. For example, if someone argues that the word in Isaiah's prophecy of the birth of the Messiah is not "virgin" but "young woman," you can easily point them to the other places in Scripture that clearly speak of the virgin birth, such as in Matthew and Luke. Thus if you will not accept the virgin birth of Christ, you are not just debating a word in Isaiah. Ultimately, you are saying that what Matthew, Luke, and the historical church have said, what the Bible says, is not true.

Here is the goal in avoiding spurious texts: we want to base a sermon on what the Holy Spirit said, not on what a scribe added. We talked previously about the autographer and the original text. That is why we use various textual schools to help us understand. Someone has asked a very good question. We are not supposed to skip over passages, so what happens if you are preaching through 1 John, and you skip over 5:7? Do you have to deal with it? The answer is yes, you have to deal with it. But one of the reasons you have to deal with it is because virtually every Bible your people use will have an asterisk by it and tell them it is not in the original text. Thus if you do not mention it, they will think you do not even know what their Bibles say. Most dependable Bibles will tell you where we know these problems are. Therefore I think you have to say something like, "We know this was added in later centuries, and while we recognize it reflects truth, it is not part of the original text. It is not inspired by the Holy Spirit." Again, Bibles will often include a note with these kinds of texts, so if you do not tell your people, they will wonder if you do not know what their Bibles say.

Someone has asked that if the note is there, why do they still include the verse? It is because of the dominance of the King James in our culture. That version continues to influence what people expect to see on the page. Somehow they have to deal with the dominant influence of the King James Version in this culture. Another question is is the King James used when translating the Bible into other languages? Inevitably. It is too dominant in our culture for them not to be aware of what the King James says. Most translators do go back to the original languages, but they still have an awareness of what the King James says. Any of the good, modern translations are based on the original languages, but the scholars who do it cannot throw it out of their minds.

There are some things to be careful about as you prepare a sermon. Be careful to base sermons on God's Word. That is what we are trying to do. We are basically affirming the sufficiency of the Word. Thus we base our sermons on God's Word. So what a scribe added, we do not feel we have to add in. What the Holy Spirit gave was sufficient. We base our sermons on God's Word. The second is be careful not to undermine people's confidence. Do you know what happens when I talk about spurious texts? Your questions start flying—what about this? What about that? What happens if I preach from the NIV Bible and say (I have heard of young men doing this), "The NIV translators made a mistake here. This would be better translated..." What does everyone in the congregation begin to wonder? Well, where are the other mistakes? What else is wrong here? I would encourage you to be aware of how arrogance can be projected. "Well, all these scholars said...but I know better." But I also warn you to be aware of how people interpret information. It is far better for people if you say something like, "This is what it says here, but we gain an even richer understanding by knowing this additional background..." Do you see how that is more helpful to people? Then you can add additions rather than creating suspicion of people's Bibles just because you know some more things than they do.

There are also some things to beware of. Beware of motto texts. This is where texts are basically taken out of their context to create a motto. For example, "I have become all things to all men that I might by all means save some." "I have become all things to all men..." and there are drug pushers out there, so I should become a drug pusher. The guys in my fraternity love to party with drugs and alcohol, so I should become someone who does the same so that I can relate to them. Is that what that verse means? No, it is taking the verse out of context. Every heretic has his verse because he takes it out of context. He says something that is there, but he takes it out of context. One of the classic motto verses from the hymn of the prohibition movement (in the United States in the 1920s) was "Touch not, taste not, handle not." Let me read you more of the hymn from where I cite it in my book,

Strong drink is raging
God has said touch not, taste not, handle not
And thousands it has captive led
Touch not, taste not, handle not
It leads the young and strong and brave
It leads them to a drunkard's grave
It leads them where no arm can save
So touch not, taste not, handle not

That is a verse from Colossians that is being used to say, "You should not partake of alcohol." What is the problem with using the words "Touch not, taste not, handle not" in that way? What is the context in Colossians? It is the exact opposite. In that passage Paul condemns those who say, "Touch not, taste not, handle not." He uses exactly the opposite meaning of what this hymn does. Granted, people may have very legitimate concerns about alcoholic addictions. You may have very legitimate concerns, but you want to base your objection on what the Spirit says, not on a wrangling of texts that is not valid.

Let us move on to conditions of selecting a text. What are some conditions for selecting a text? There are two basic philosophies. These two basic philosophies are known as flow and web. The first, flow, is flowing through a text and addressing situations as they come. I may preach from a book of the Bible and, starting in chapter one, I flow through the text. I think of the situations that can be addressed by the text I am in. The second, web, is where you have a situation and you look for a text to deal with it. Now, again, there are historic debates in preaching over the appropriateness and non-appropriateness of these things. I would just encourage you not to get caught up in hyperbole on either side. If Hurricane Ivan is very damaging, will there be preachers in New Orleans or Mobile or the panhandle of Florida who will

need to find texts to help their people deal with that? Of course. And if they have been “flowing” through Isaiah for the past few months, might it be a good idea to move to another text for right now? It might be a good idea. Sometimes the situation demands that we find a text. Sometimes, of course, it is best to move consecutively through a book of the Bible because when you do you can address many different issues that you would not have naturally thought of if you were just on your own. You might take people through the thought of an apostolic writer in order to do that.

Here are possibilities of how we select a text, if you are aware of both web and flow. The first possibility for how we select a text is known as consecutive preaching. Consecutive preaching moves chapter by chapter, book by book. What are some of the advantages of consecutive preaching? I do not have to research a new book every week. Going consecutively through a book really helps the preacher’s research process. That helps me a lot. It also helps avoid deciding what to preach on every week. Last week you preached on chapter one, this week you will preach on chapter two. What does it teach God’s people when you preach consecutively through a text? It teaches the cohesion of the text, how the logic of the writer develops. By the way, while I have mentioned going chapter by chapter, consecutive preaching is very much related to what is called versicular preaching. This is not chapter by chapter, but verse by verse. This could mean preaching one verse at a time, or it could be what we normally do—expository unit to expository unit, paragraph to paragraph, or narrative to narrative—moving in thought units like that.

Another possibility beyond consecutive preaching is subject series. This means identifying various subjects and series of preaching on that subject. In your church, has the preacher ever done a series on the family, or marriage relationships, or healing the brokenness caused by gossip? These are all series on a subject. Do you remember the topical Bible, the *Nave’s Topical Bible*? This helps deal with a topic in a series. What are the advantages of this? Why would you deal with a topic and keep going at it in a series? You have more time to deal with a topic. There may be a particular need that you are addressing. It allows you to deal with a particular need and to a greater depth. Those are some advantages. Also, there is a certain sense of being contemporary if you deal with what people are struggling with. Another possibility is the church calendar. There are many debates in Reformed circles about what days you can honor and what days you cannot. Recognize those debates are there.

Again, I think you have to exegete not only the text but also your congregation and your situation. What can you deal with? In most of our churches, not to deal with the nativity at Christmas time and not to deal with the resurrection at Easter will be perceived as quite odd. Now, there are a few churches that say, “That is just being Catholic, honoring holy days.” Even John Calvin did not believe that. Calvin was willing to honor the major days of the church year but not tie them to the sacerdotal system. He was willing to do that. You can read those debates; I do not mean to try to solve them for you. But I do mean to make you aware that most preachers in this culture keep an awareness of where we are in the holidays of the year, and not only the church holidays, but at times the national holidays as well. I say only partially joking that you can fail to mention fathers on Father’s Day, but making no mention of mothers on Mother’s Day may get you in trouble. This is just an awareness of where our culture is that you need to deal with even if you object to it. Be aware of those things.

The dangers of subject series and even calendar series is that we can begin to concentrate on cultural preferences or personal preferences rather than the Bible. Do you hear that? For example, a preacher might say, “I love talking about the problem of gambling in this culture. So now this is my 52nd series on the subject of gambling!” Two things will happen if you do this. First, people will get very bored. But second, who will they think really has a problem with gambling? You, the preacher. Subject series may begin to highlight my own sin struggles in ways I did not intend to if I cannot move off the subject. If all

the time I am talking about a sin struggle in one area, people will begin to think, “This person does not know what I am going through. This must be what they are going through.” Or, we can just begin to ride hobbyhorses, focusing on our interests rather than preparing God’s people for the spectrum of their concerns.

Here are some standards for interpreting a text. Be true to the text. Use historical-grammatical method rather than spiritualizing. Spiritualizing is sometimes called the allegorical method. We are looking for the literal meaning. Now, that scares people. “You mean you are one of those fundamentalists who believe the Bible literally?” Well, the Reformers used the phrase *sensus literalis*. The *sensus literalis* means the literal sense of the words. What was actually being communicated? In modern terminology we could say what does the discourse mean? This is not *litterum*, taking words woodenly. When you say, “It was raining cats and dogs,” do you mean cats and dogs were falling out of the sky? No. What does the discourse mean? It was raining very hard. That is what you mean. Likewise, a prophet may refer to the Word of God going to the four corners of the earth. Does he mean the earth is square? Do you sometimes refer to the four corners of the earth? You mean the compass settings, right? What I mean by looking for the literal meaning is taking the sense of the author—what the author intended to say—is what we believe. Hear that? This is not literal, wooden, silly use of language. This is looking for discourse meaning.

The second standard is determining the author’s intent. To do this we will examine audience, genre, text features, and context (both historical and literary context). Here are some special cautions: in language, be cautious about depending on English language only. If you are in Philippians 2:13, “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you both to will and to do his good pleasure.” You may think, “What? Work out your salvation with fear and trembling?” I actually do not know how you can explain that verse if you do not know the Greek behind it. If you know the Greek, you know the first “work” reference is about working something in a continual way, and the second reference, “for it is God who is at work...” is a verb of completed action. Thus you can explain it this way, “You should be working on what God has done.” Otherwise, if you say simply, “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling...” I do not know anyone who can do that. I do not know how you could explain it with English only. Also, be careful of depending on out-of-date translations. The King James in 1 Thessalonians 4:15 says, “We who are alive when Christ comes shall not prevent the dead from rising.” Now, can you perceive what that means? What is the meaning of “prevent” in the King James? At the time of writing, “prevent” meant “precede,” “to come before.” Thus, if we are dependent on English only and an older translation, we will not recognize at all what is meant.

Let us move to genre. There are some different things here. Prophecy that is not presented as predictive will get you in big trouble. You will interpret it wrongly. Isaiah 40 is about the suffering servant who gives up assurance. But it is talking about the Messiah to come. If we do not place Isaiah 40 in the future, we will misinterpret the text.

Parables are another difficult genre. With parables we look for the meaning core rather than trying to make every particular mean something. In the account of Lazarus and the rich man, the rich man speaks to the poor man across an abyss. They talk to one another across a physical abyss between heaven and hell. Does that mean there is physical distance between heaven and hell and that the saints in heaven talk to those who are in hell? Is that what that means? It does not mean that at all. What is being expressed is the core meaning of the parable, which we should recognize: there is not a chance of returning to this earth again to establish our justification before God. Now is the time. We push the parable beyond what its intention was when we look to every particular instead of its core meaning.

Another genre is proverbs. Proverbs are prescriptive, not predictive. “A soft answer turns away wrath.” Now, is that God’s promise that when you answer softly, people will never get mad at you? Is that what it means? It says right there in the Bible, “A soft answer turns away wrath”! A proverb is prescriptive. The wise people lay it to heart. It is the counsel for how they should live. It is not an absolute promise of what will occur. You know a soft answer does not always turn away wrath. What about this one? “Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.” Is that always true? Every good parent raises up good children, and bad children are obvious evidence of bad parenting. Is that true? Have you ever heard it preached that way? People took a proverb and made it predictive rather than prescriptive. It is not predictive. It is not an absolute promise or prediction of what will occur. What father in the Scripture is presented as an ideal father and raises a bad son? Luke 15, the father who raises the prodigal son. Another genre is narratives versus didactic passages. In narratives we have to look at the actions for what communicates truth in addition to the words in most cases. The actions more than or rather, in addition to the words, communicate truth in narratives. Actually, in a narrative what someone says may be false. Job’s friends say very bad things and yet it is in the Bible! If you quote Job’s friends as saying true things, you are in big trouble because they are telling him wrong things.

What we are trying to do is this: maintain and understand the text’s features for their functions. Are the chapter and verse divisions inspired? No, they are not. If a word is italicized, is that there for emphasis? No, it is because it was missing in the original language. An italicized word means it is being filled in for the flow of language, and this word did not appear in the original. It is not there for emphasis, it is there for de-emphasis. The book order of our Bibles is not inspired—Matthew being before Luke, for example. What we are trying to do for all these things is to remember the context. In interpretation, context is always part of the text. With Romans 14 and 15, if you do not read chapter 14, you will understand exactly the opposite of what is meant in chapter 15 concerning who is weak and who is strong. You will get it exactly backward if you do not read Romans 15 in the context of Romans 14. The example I really love is Genesis 31:49, “May the Lord watch between you and me whenever we are apart.” People in our culture print that on coins, break them apart, and give them to one another. This is what Laban said to Jacob. And what does it mean? “If you come back across my territory, I will slit your throat. And may the Lord watch between you and me while we are apart.” That is what it means. People use it for these wonderful, sentimental cards and such, but that is not what it means. What is the context?

Let us move on to possible approaches for interpretation. The broad view is this: sometimes we have to take a lot of text at once. For example, you may recognize, “I need to deal with both the early and later parts of Job in order to preach it. So I will distill a lot of material.” That is the broad view. I can distill it down and preach it accurately. That is often what we do with narratives: take a lot of material and distill it down to its essence. The narrow view is exploding the implications. I will take one verse or one paragraph and tell you the implications of it. I want you to know those are both legitimate teaching approaches: to distill a lot of information or to explode a little information. These are both legitimate ways of preaching. At times, both are necessary.

The final thought for this lesson is not to deny your people your interpretation. Do not deny yourself or your people your interpretation. Here is one of the great dangers you can find in seminary or other training where you use all these great commentaries: I want to preach on a text, and I run first to a commentary to figure out how to do it. Now what will happen? Whose thoughts will I think? Someone else’s thoughts. Someone who is away from the situation, maybe even someone who has been dead for years. We do not want to preach a dead or a distant person’s sermon. Believe that God put you in this situation to minister to these people. We want to be those who are thinking God’s thoughts for these people, and be careful not to preach a dead or a distant man’s sermon. The way we do that is we study the text even as we study God’s people and ask, “What is God saying to me for these people?” Start

down the path, believing God has a purpose for you. Now, will we check ourselves? Sure we will. We will use all these tools to make sure we are going down proper paths. But I would encourage you not to make your first step, “What do the commentaries say?” Make your first step: read, digest the text, and say, “What do God’s people need to hear?” And then progress that way.