

## **The Interpretive Process, Continued**

Please open your Bible to Matthew 5. I want to look at a passage that is very important; it is a hinge passage in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7. It is also a passage that has been considered to be at the center of Matthew's emphases in his theology. It is the passage of Matthew 5:17-20, which reads,

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

This is a very strong teaching. It is especially strong for us in the Protestant tradition coming out of the Reformation, Luther, and the recognition that salvation is not based on our works. It is based on God's grace received through our faith. Yet Jesus says, "For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven."

There have been various ways of dealing with this in Protestant biblical scholarship. One way is the older dispensational way. Some of you may know that there is a theology that is centered in America and the United Kingdom that is known as dispensational theology. It holds to seven different dispensations, seven different ways that God interacted with His creation. The crucial distinction is between Law, which is the Mosaic covenant, and grace, which comes with Jesus Christ. There is a distinction between Law and grace. In contemporary teaching there is what is known as progressive dispensationalists. They would not hold to this. The old dispensational way of dealing with this on the Sermon on the Mount is that this is legalistic works righteousness. In order to get to heaven Jesus is telling the Jewish people in front of them that their righteousness has to even exceed that of the Pharisees. What the old dispensationalists are effectively saying is that the whole Sermon on the Mount is not given to Gentiles in the new dispensation of grace. It is given to Jewish people at the end of the dispensation of law. Law is still here, and grace is something that is still waiting to come until after Jesus' death and resurrection. Therefore the Sermon on the Mount, in their eyes, does not apply to us. That is what they would say. It is meant for Jewish people before Jesus' death and resurrection.

I have some problems with that personally. We looked at the Beatitudes last time. I would like to think that the Beatitudes pronounced blessing on God's people for all time. More to the point, there are whole areas in the Sermon on the Mount that we intuitively know they apply to the church. For instance, in Matthew 6:8-13 the Lord's Prayer is in the Sermon on the Mount, "Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. This, then, is how you should pray: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done...'" Not only is this something that the church has treasured for millennia, and not only is it a very edifying prayer, but it also announces a bit of a change in terms of the typical way that somebody would pray. In particular, God's people are now being invoked by Jesus to address God and "Father." There is some continuity with aspects of the Old Testament, but there is also some break with that. This would imply that this was a change. There is more intimacy here in the Sermon on the Mount. I do not think it works to say that the Sermon on the Mount applies to Jewish people and not to Gentiles in the new dispensation. More broadly, I do not think that there were two different dispensations. God has always interacted graciously with His people

and did so in the time of Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. We will talk more about that at another time.

There is another way of dealing with this verse, especially Matthew 5:20, “For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.” Some think this is meant to demean the scribes and the Pharisees. After all, it is just a few chapters later in Matthew itself where Jesus says, “Woe to you Pharisees, you hypocrites...” These are hypocrites; these are people who did not know that in their outward appearance they were doing all right, but on the inside they were completely rotten. When he finally mentions the Pharisees, everybody else sitting around and hearing Jesus is probably glad and thinking, “They have deserved their retribution for a long time.” There is some truth to that. But it is also based on a poor understanding of how Pharisees were perceived in the first century. They were generally understood as righteous people. They were perhaps the most righteous people in all of Israel. Even if there was hypocrisy there because they were living a surface-based righteousness, the rest of the throngs were not waiting for the Pharisees to get nailed by Jesus. In fact, probably when they heard this idea that their righteousness should surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees, they were thinking they could not do it.

That brings us to a third possible interpretation, which is a very common Protestant interpretation of this passage. It is that this is a statement of law. It is a statement of law to drive home just how harsh the Mosaic Law is and how it is impossible for you to keep it. You are brought to a crisis where you fall on your knees and ask for God’s grace. This is intended to provoke the depth of the misery of being under the Law and the realization that you cannot keep it. That sounds like a very good way of dealing with this. It is works righteousness but not as a real way of getting to heaven. It is a hypothetical works righteousness. If you want a standard in which your works are going to get you into heaven, pick the best people in all of Israel, and you have to do better than them. That interpretation sounds good, and it is very comforting. However, my opinion is that that does not work. I recognize there is a diversity of opinion within Christianity, and good scholars disagree on this. But I do not think it works in full, especially in context of the book of Matthew or the Sermon on the Mount. I am doing this homily today to encourage you, both in terms of your relationship to God and also methodologically. I want to encourage you to always look at the context.

Matthew 5:17-19 says, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets.” This is an explicit statement by our Lord that He is not overthrowing the Law and the Prophets. He is not throwing this stuff out. That is another reason that I do not see the dispensational line working. He is not abolishing the Law; we are not moving into a different dispensation. The Law is still intact. “I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.” One of the big issues we will have to return to is what does “fulfill” mean in Matthew? We will come back to that next time. This is a statement whereby He is seeing Himself as fulfilling the Law, not doing away with it. “I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.” You go into verse 20 and you are set up to say, “Jesus is not throwing over the Law.” This is very significant in Matthew because what Jesus does repeatedly is heal on the Sabbath. He gets into trouble with the Pharisees because He does it. He does not see that as a breaking of the Law. He sees it perhaps as a fulfillment of the Law. We understand His concept there. When He says He did not come to abolish the Law, you have to ask who in the book of Matthew would claim that Jesus is trying to abolish the Law. This is what the Pharisees are claiming! They are the very people He says whose righteousness you have to surpass.

More importantly for understanding verse 20, if you look at the rest of Matthew 5, it takes on a pattern. “You have heard it said... But I say to you...” He is quoting a legal precedent, and then He says it is worse than you think. Let us see how it works. Verse 21 says, “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’” It is fascinating that He starts off with that. There are two things going on there. “You shall not commit murder”—we recognize that from the Ten Commandments. That is an explicit Old Testament quotation. “Anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.” That is a hard quote to find in your Bibles. It is how rabbinic tradition understood the Old Testament, and it is in keeping with Old Testament tradition. The crucial thing in rabbinic tradition is when somebody needs to come to the court. Under what circumstances do you bring somebody to the court, what do you charge him or her with, and what is the punishment? In other words, Jesus is starting with the idea that murder is more than a legal issue. He says, “But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.” Jesus is saying that you might think that murder and the Old Testament Law is all about when you bring somebody to court. He is saying instead it is about the heart. Murder is something that we do in our own souls. We do this when we are so angry with somebody that we wish they were dead. Perhaps you know that, but I am just reminding you that that is what is going on in the rest of Matthew 5.

Let us go on to the next one, Matthew 5:27, “You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’” Jewish legal precedents had a lot of teaching about what constituted adultery and what you do with an adulterer. They were doing a good job of trying to understand legally how to apply the Old Testament. The rabbis were very smart people. They intended to be careful to enact every bit of legislation that is found in the Law. Jesus says it is not just a legal issue, but it is a matter of the heart. “But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” It is a heart matter. Look at verse 31, “It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’” That is a quotation from Deuteronomy. It is Old Testament Law. “But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.”

There is a fascinating account in the rabbinic documents that indicates that there was a disagreement over this very passage right in this time period by the two main rabbinic schools. The Deuteronomy passage is very fascinating; it is Deuteronomy 24:1-4, “If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, and if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another man, and her second husband dislikes her and writes her a certificate of divorce,...” It goes on. This is a very legal text. It is assuming that divorce is going to occur. It is trying to limit some of the ramifications that could come out of divorce if it is done poorly. It is trying to safeguard those who are divorced from getting themselves into even more trouble. That is what is going on in Deuteronomy 24. It is one of the few passages in all of the Old Testament that speaks about divorce. If you were a rabbinic teacher of the Law, there are all sorts of other questions that would come up for you. For instance, under what circumstances may you divorce. So they exegeted this passage very carefully. “If a man marries a woman”—they have to be married. That is a start. “Who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her.” Those are two different things; displeasing to him and indecency. The question is, what constitutes indecency? What constitutes being displeasing? The rabbinic schools debated over this. One of them said the wife needs to have done something that is horrible. The other school said “displeasing” means that the husband becomes disgusted with her. Different things can constitute being disgusted. She could burn his meal twice. It would be unfair to divorce her if she did it once because that could be an accident. But the second time through she knows

better. The rabbinic school said that could constitute sufficient grounds for divorce. That was the context. This is careful, rabbinic, legal exegesis, and it is probably with the best of motives. They really wanted to determine when the Law says it is all right to divorce. Jesus says, "Except for marital unfaithfulness." His position is that adultery constitutes indecency. He has a much harsher view of what constitutes these things. That has to do with the internal state. The wife has broken the bond of unity in the marriage by cohabitating with another person. The internal state of the marriage has changed, and that constitutes grounds for divorce. It does not say you have to divorce in that context. But that is the sufficient ground at that point.

Jesus consistently teaches in the rest of Matthew 5 on the huge topics of murder, adultery, divorce, and others. The Pharisees were the ancestors of the rabbinic teachings that we have. When Jesus says to surpass the righteousness of the Pharisees, He is not just talking about what you have to do in order to accomplish the Law and avoid being brought to the court. He is saying that the Law speaks to our internal state and our relatedness with God. Therefore you have to surpass what the Pharisees are teaching and bring it to an internal state. It is in that context that He does not want to abolish the Law, but He wants to fulfill it. The rest of what is going on in Matthew tells us what the Law is intending to say to us in terms of its internal state. I will stop there because next time we will talk a little bit more about fulfillment.

I want to return to this passage again. I want to signal to you how important this passage is for the rest of the Sermon on the Mount. It sets up the rest of the teaching in the whole of chapter 5. It also sets up Jesus' relationship to the Pharisees. When He calls them hypocrites, it is the Greek meaning of the phrase *hypokrites*. It is the idea of a person who acts the part. Externally everything is going right. They are really doing a good job of trying to make sure they understand what the Law means in terms of the courts. But you need to look internally. That would have been a shock to people in His day. It should still shock us because it should make us very uncomfortable. We can no longer examine how we are doing externally; we have to ask how our heart is.

Let me pray for us.

*Father, as we come to a passage such as this we are thankful that Jesus, our Savior and Lord, clarified the purpose and intent of the Law. We are challenged to look internally and to walk as Your people. We are very aware of how far we are from that. We are thankful that this is not the only teaching on the Law in the New Testament. You, O Lord, have wrought for us salvation so that indeed as we look at the Law and see our sinful souls, grace abounds. Grace abounds through the death and resurrection of our Lord. We would acknowledge this certainly. Yet, Lord, we would not wish to leave aside this passage and just assume and presume on Your grace. Make us those who would follow You, not just in externals, but those whose hearts seek purity before You. In the midst of our repentance and our confession, enable us to work as Your people and to live lives that are holy and bring glory to You. In Your wonderful name we pray. Amen.*

I would like to remind us of where we have come so far in our discussions of how to think about the New Testament. We started off with the idea of an author, a text, and a reader. We engaged in the practice of reflecting on contemporary thought about interpretation. We talked about interpretation of any literature but especially interpretation of the New Testament. We said that it is unfair to completely divorce the author in his intention from his text. The author self-reveals himself in his text. A good author is able to communicate to his audience in ways that they understand and can comprehend what he or she is trying to convey. The text is not absolutized away from the author. Because of that, when you look at the text, hypothetically and in practice there probably are gaps in the text. There are things you

have to fill in because the author does not tell you absolutely everything you need to know. The author, if he is working well, tells the audience enough and is able to presume on the audience's knowledge coming into the reading of the text. He or she does that assuming on cultural affinity, knowledge, and commonness. That area of cultural commonality allows those gaps in the text to be filled in so that we can fully understand the intention of the author. That means that the reader does not just get to read the text and make it mean whatever he or she wants it to mean. The ethics of approaching a text require us to understand what the author intended to convey to his or her audience in his or her day. Then we can disagree with that if we want to. The fair way of approaching a text is trying to understand what the author intended to communicate. That is true in literary theory in general. Obviously it is all the more true with an inspired, inerrant, holy text that is inspired by God Himself. The author is human, but he is working under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to produce a text that is inspired. We need to understand that text in light of its intended communication. We cannot just make it whatever we want it to be. Whereas with other texts we can choose to disagree, we cannot be so flippant when we approach the Bible.

The other thought that came up toward the end of last time was the idea of our pre-understanding approaching the text. The question was whether or not there is a hermeneutical circle. There are some people who use the term hermeneutical circle in a not-so-bad way. But others use it to describe a vicious circle. They say because we have a pre-understanding when we approach the text we can never abandon that. Therefore we just end up reading our pre-understanding back into the text all the time. In other words, the text is a better reflection of us than it is of the author. Last time we talked about various ways in which that could be true. There are dangers there, but there are also aspects of this whole thing that give us grounds for some confidence. Last time we said as we approach a text we should do so with a self-awareness and humility. We should allow the text to speak to our pre-understanding and have an awareness of our pre-understanding. We need to realize there are possible ways that we are wrong and be willing to give that up so that we can become more open to the text. The text, in the midst of our subjectivity, still remains an object. It is out there for us to perceive. We can ask if our pre-understanding coheres to the actual words that are in the text. Sometimes as you read a text you may feel like you know you realize that it does not fit with what you know that it means. It is very discouraging, but you should learn to listen to that and acknowledge that you do not understand what it means. Maybe you do understand it, but you need to be able to articulate whether you are right or wrong and why. Another aspect of this is that if it is just you approaching the text, then it is just your own pre-understanding of the text. That is very dangerous. You should read the text in a broader community. Interact with the community in your church today, listening to the points that they make in the text as well as the points you want to make. You should also listen to the community of the church throughout all time. Church history becomes very helpful in interpreting the text. It can take us outside of our own pre-understanding and give us another way of looking at the text. We can ask if that is right, better, or worse. Reading in community becomes very important.

One final point to make is that we have the Holy Spirit. This assumes a holy horizontal plane, but the Holy Spirit can speak into our lives in a way that unveils the Scriptures for us. Maybe you have seen that in the lives of others, or maybe you have a sense in your own life that that has happened at times. We would all agree that we have to be very careful with that. The television airwaves are currently full of people who are willing to tell you that they know exactly what God has intended from His Scriptures for your life. Some of them need to spend a little bit more time studying their Bibles and less time meditating on their own thoughts. In other words, people make mistakes. They are confident that the Holy Spirit is doing all this. We have to be careful there. The fact that the Holy Spirit is working in our lives gives us some grounds for optimism as well. I prefer to speak of, instead of a hermeneutical circle, a hermeneutical spiral. I am borrowing that term from several people, especially from a book by Grant

Osborne entitled *The Hermeneutical Spiral*. We should critique our own self-understanding in all humility and read the text in community. We need to be very careful to pay attention objectively to what the text says, the words it uses, and the facts in the text. As we pray and ask for God's illumination through His Holy Spirit, we can have grounds for optimism that we are spiraling in and getting closer and closer to a right understanding of the text.

We can never be sure that we have understood the whole of the New Testament 100% correctly. None of us is going to approximate that. On the other hand, there are some big picture items in the New Testament that are very much in your face repeatedly again and again. "Jesus died for our sins." If you miss that you have missed something so big that you obviously are clueless in reading the New Testament. That is so repeated and so engrained in the New Testament that we can be a lot more confident in our understanding of the text than something less clear. For instance, there are teachings in 1 Peter regarding Noah and our Lord preaching to those who are in prison. That is a weird text in 1 Peter 3. It is really wacky. There are about nine different interpretations that I know of in the major commentaries. There are some texts that are really hard, and we can disagree over them. But there are other texts that are so clear and central. We can be confident that to say that Jesus did not die for sins is to abandon the faith. We can dispute about what the whole thing is with Noah in 1 Peter 3.

Some have asked why people should listen to deconstructionists if they are primarily saying they are just reading the text for themselves. They are subjective, and they love that subjectivity. It is a very interesting intellectual endeavor. It is fun. If you read Derrida, he will use the word "play." He plays with the text. He has fun with the text. You get to the end of it and you think, "That guy is really smart, and he had a lot of fun there. It was fun doing that." Then you sit back and realize that the author just got trampled in the process. It is fun and engaging. Deconstructionists would say that they are not trying to force you into their same area of thought. They are trying to provoke in you a similar sentiment so that you, too, can play and have fun with the text. That is what they are trying to do. The age-old critique of a subjective viewpoint is that if you are wholly subjective, why do you even bother saying anything to somebody else? They are going to make of it what they want, so communication is a lost endeavor. The best deconstructionist philosophers are aware of that critique. Instead of just throwing up their hands, they engage all of it and enjoy it. We are subjective beings, so let us plunge right in. They are not wholly inconsistent in the matter; it is just a very different way of thinking than you might want to bring to the text.

I said that there are things that are so obvious that we dare not abandon those because they are so central to what is going on in the New Testament. But we do not seem to agree on what is obvious, so how can we be sure that something is obvious? There are a couple of tests to do. In terms of church history, you have been fed a steady diet of the diversity of Christianity in your historical training. Christians cannot agree with one another, so we are constantly splitting. Aside from a very few heretical sects, I do not think any Christian denomination, even the most far out one that you can think of that still calls itself "Christian," would disagree with the assertion that Christ died for our sins. That is so obvious in the New Testament. There are things that Christians have agreed on for centuries. We are not going to completely throw up our hands and say that denominations prevent us from coming to truth. Second, the stuff that is repeated again and again is glaringly obvious. "Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah. He is the Lord. If you refuse to bow your knee to Jesus, the Lord, the Christ, you missed it." It is things like that, stuff that is so overtly repeated. The last thing is that, even with some of the things that have been disputed among different denominations, I still do not want to just give up trying to understand. I want to try to understand what the author is trying to say to his intended audience. I want us to do our best job of using the best methods of interpretation. When we do so, we can approach with a very high level of confidence if it is a main point that the author is trying to convey. It is the more minor points that are

thrown out on the way to making a different point, like in 1 Peter 3 with Noah, that I am willing to say are in the area of increasing doubt. It is very complex and involves a lot more pondering. Those are a few quick points.

I want to talk about one more diagram regarding communication. Our interpretive framework needs to work for the Bible, but it should also be fairly reliable in interpreting other works like from Shakespeare or Chaucer. We need to have some idea of how literature works before we start doing our interpretation of Scripture and literature. There is a diagram that comes up in every one of my classes because I really care about it. I want us to think through how authors communicate to audiences. If you are in conversation with somebody, the arrow is bidirectional between the author and the audience. The main difference between writing a text and having a conversation is that the arrow goes one direction. There is an author writing to an audience. When I am talking about an author writing to an audience, I am thinking about somebody like Paul. The audience is some place like Corinth. This is true more broadly as well.

Let us look at the phrase, "I am very disappointed because Dierbergs [a grocery store in Saint Louis] is out of eggnog since the yuletide is past." Yuletide might not be a typical word for you; you might have preferred Christmas. Most of you probably know what eggnog is but maybe not everyone. All of you living in Saint Louis probably understand the idea of Dierbergs because you live in Saint Louis. Dierbergs is a grocery store. A grocery store in America is not a little store the size of a closet. It is huge and gigantic. You walk in and there are sliding glass doors and gigantic shopping carts. You go in and throw things into the cart; you know what a grocery store is. When I say that I am disappointed that Dierbergs is out of eggnog because the yuletide is past, you understand basically what I mean. Let us say hypothetically that I went to Ghana, I stepped off the plane, greeted somebody, and said, "I am very disappointed because Dierbergs is out of eggnog since the yuletide is past." They would not have any clue what I was talking about! They would not know because the culture is different. Some of it has to do with the definition of specific words: eggnog, yuletide. Some of it has to do with the word Dierbergs, but that has a broader set of connotations that go with it. All of that immediately comes to those of you in the United States because you are in a particular cultural context. Let me draw some mountains in the background of the author and the audience in this diagram. There is a background and an area of cultural commonality shared by the author and the audience. That makes communication possible. I knew that, except for those of you who are not American, as soon as I gave my sentence about Dierbergs and eggnog you would primarily understand it. I know enough about your knowledge of the culture that I could speak to you as an author speaking to an audience. That act of communication worked. That is how authors work. That is how Paul works. When Paul talks about marriage to the people in Corinth, he is talking about it with regard to shared concepts of marriage in antiquity. When he talks about tongues in Corinth, they know what he means. When he talks about prophecy, they know what he means. When he talks about divisions in the church, they know what it means because they are living it. That is how communication works. The problem is this context is not us. We are not living in Corinth in the first century. That is one of the real crisis points in terms of understanding and interpreting something. Let me add something else to the diagram.

Let me talk about what I specifically mean about the background between Paul and Corinth. There are two areas of background in particular. One is the Greco-Roman context of the ancient world, Hellenism and its consequences, and the nature of the Roman Empire. The other is Judaism and an awareness of it even among some of the Gentiles. That is part of the shared cultural context that they have. That is what defines whether they understand the word "Dierbergs" or we understand the words "tongues" or "prophecy." When I explain this diagram one of the things I do not want you to think is that it means that every act of communication is wholly dependent on culture. Paul got his ideas from the culture of

his day. There are a lot of people in New Testament scholarship who are asking what the origin of the author's thought is. When they say that they very often are asking what aspects in the author's culture made him come up with the concepts that he had. But I do not think that is how Paul thought. Paul was thinking explicitly about the Old Testament and Jesus. He was thinking about the teaching of Jesus and His life and ministry. He was explicitly drawing on the Old Testament because that was his canon. That is what he believed to be Scripture. He was also drawing on the teaching of Jesus because He was his Lord. I will play that out later as we talk about ramifications of that and understanding Paul and others in the New Testament. Obviously the audience knows the Old Testament and the teachings of Jesus, so that too is part of their common cultural understanding. But that is what Paul is explicitly drawing on even though he is speaking in cultural terms. That would be true if we took out Paul and Corinth and put any other author and audience in this diagram. That is how communication works. This is especially how Paul was working. I want to say there is more to it than that.

In 2 Peter 3:16 Peter says that Paul's writings are Scripture, even if they are hard to understand. This is not just working on a human level. The Holy Spirit is superintending the whole process, producing an inspired result. I have just stated an understanding of inspiration that some of you may not have interacted with before. It is very common in our circles to speak of the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture. But we rarely talk about mechanism. Therefore people are left asking how Scripture was inspired. God breathed it and produced it, but how did He do it? Probably a default understanding is to say that in the time Paul sat down with his pen to paper, God took over. It was almost like for two hours Paul was so in communion with God that he was a channel. There are times when God seems to have worked that way in the Old Testament. He explicitly said things to His prophets and told them to tell the people. All they had to do was say it, and they were done. That does not seem to be the way that God inspired all of Scripture, though. Christian teaching on inspiration is generally much more sophisticated than that. Often God uses the normal human means to produce an inspired result. The Corinthians had issues revolving around things such as divisions in the church, the nature of the resurrection, marriage, celibacy, adultery, tongues, and its role in the church. They wrote Paul about these issues. It seems to be in 1 Corinthians that Paul is responding to a letter that he has received. He has an agenda, but they have also set part of the agenda. He is sitting down, aware of his apostolic role and mandate, aware of the fact that he has the Holy Spirit, and still aware that he is a human being writing to a group of human beings. He engages in this process of communication. Paul brings together all of his life experience up to that moment, his reading of the Old Testament, his understanding of the teachings of Jesus, and his interaction with his fellow Christians from whom he learned quite a lot and to whom he taught quite a lot. In that moment when he dictated 1 Corinthians, all of that came together to produce an inspired result. That means that as we approach Scripture we approach it as both human and divine. It is somewhat analogous to the incarnation in the sense that these are human beings acting as human beings under the inspiration of the Spirit, and therefore the result is inspired in a way that no other literature in the rest of the world is inspired. That is how I understand inspiration.

Some of you may have heard the term "verbal plenary inspiration." This is a fancy theological term. Verbal refers to the Word, and plenary refers to the whole of it. When we speak of inspiration we mean that all of Scripture is inspired and that each and every word is inspired. It does not mean that the person was a channel. It means that the result is that every word is inspired to say exactly to that audience what God would say and have His people for all time read. Every word of it is exactly what God would have. We will talk about that a little bit more later.

We are talking about God's communication to us. We have our own set of cultural contexts, be it Ghana, Taiwan, or the southern United States. Wherever our particular cultural context is, that is our backdrop. We need to decide as we approach Scripture what Paul was saying to the audience and what God would

have that say to us today. We do not have some of the same problems that you find in 1 Corinthians. There is not the same issue with the resurrection in most spheres of Christianity today. There are not the exact same issues with marriage today. There are ramifications of it, and there is a lot of overlap. Probably one of the most difficult texts in all of 1 Corinthians to apply to today is in 1 Corinthians 11 where it talks about head coverings. It says that women are to cover their heads in worship, and it gives a variety of reasons for that. It also says that men are not to cover their heads in worship. We still have a legacy of that in our chapel. The proper thing in chapel is for men to take off their caps. Otherwise it is disrespectful. But we do not generally ask for women to wear head coverings. We are not doing exactly what is stated in 1 Corinthians 11. There are some churches that apply it exactly, word for word. I would argue that you have to understand what that meant in Paul's day.

Let us start with the easier one, which is about the men. Why does Paul say that men should not have their heads covered? Why is that even an issue? I have a great picture of Augustus as a priest. He is wearing the priestly garments, and he has this thing over his head. If you look at most ancient statues of priests, their heads are all covered. That is not to say that the whole worshipping community was that way. It is just the priests whose heads are covered. When Paul explicitly says men are not to cover their heads, there are probably cultural associations that we do not understand. We do not have priests in that same sense who are conducting pagan religions to a whole variety of different deities, none of whom is truly God. That is different. That might be one of the issues there. With regard to women's coverings, he repeatedly shows that this is a sign of submission and respect. Ladies, when you wear a hat today, are you thinking about submission and respect? Some of you might think this, depending on your cultural context. The vast majority of people who wear hats are not thinking of it as submission. It seems to me that in this context there is a trans-cultural application of this. Basically, it is simply to say that men are to submit to Christ and show that is their area of respect. Women are to submit to their husbands. That is what the passage says. That is the trans-cultural aspect. They are to have some way of showing that that is the way that all of this goes. In our society the wearing of a hat no longer shows that. The outward display is not important, but perhaps the inward display is important if you are going to be consistent in understanding 1 Corinthians 11. The point is that you take what is trans-cultural and you apply it to your culture today. It may look different for each culture.

Let me give you a better example of trans-cultural application. I do not think you will have any problems with this. I know that there are issues with women's roles in society and the meaning of 1 Corinthians 11. My other example is from the Old Testament. Did you know that you are bound in the Old Testament to have parapets on your roof? Some of you do not even know what a parapet is! That is because your culture is wholly different. Probably it is better to define a roof than a parapet. You assume that you know what a roof looks like. It keeps the ice, rain, and snow off of a building. But that is not what they look like in Palestine. In Palestine there were ladders that went up to your roof. There were times that it was better for you to be out in the open than inside in the house. It was too hot to be down in the house. You might sleep up on the roof. There was a group of us who were excavating in Jordan this past summer. We stayed in a nice concrete schoolhouse, but there was no air conditioning and no fans. You kept the windows open because your only hope for cooling that place down was the breeze that went through. There were some times in the middle of the summer when it was so hot it was still 90 degrees and it was the middle of the night. You could not bear to sleep on your mattress inside. There were people who would go up to the roof because it was a lot cooler there. There was nothing to inhibit the breeze, and it blew right across you. There were reasons that you would use the roof in Palestine in antiquity, and it is still done in parts of the Middle East. If that is the case then one of the things you have to watch out for is falling off of the roof. What you need is a parapet, which is a structure that would go around the roof to keep somebody from falling off. It is like a little wall. The Old Testament legally obligated people to build these parapets so people would not fall off the roof. That way people

would not get into trouble because they had done something in constructing their home that would make it natural for someone to get hurt.

We have just understood author to audience communication in the cultural framework. You needed to know something about the culture to understand what was going on there. Does that have any relevance to us today? Some would say the Old Testament Law has no relevance to us today. Ultimately I would say that the Old Testament Law often speaks to the internal state that we as Christians are supposed to have. Trans-culturally that commandment was about making sure that you do not put other people in danger. We need to bring that into our context. Let us talk about an example of something around our houses or places of living that might be equal. Recently we had a lot of snow and ice here in Saint Louis. It was very slick and dangerous. It was wholly possible for people to be walking up our driveway and slip and fall. It would have been much more responsible of me to put out a little bit of salt and make sure that no one injured themselves because I had not constructed my property in the correct way. We have now tried to understand what the author was saying to his audience in the midst of his culture. We tried to understand what the principle was that came out of that. It is something that is trans-culturally applicable even to us today. Then we tried to reinculturate it into our own cultural context. This speaks to our whole process of interpretation. Our process starts with trying to understand what the author was trying to convey. We need to pay attention to cultural context and to how the authors draw on the Old Testament and Jesus. We need to look at the very specifics of the audience and the very specifics of the author. We need to know a lot about Paul if we are going to understand what Paul is saying. We need to know as much as we can about Corinth and the Corinthians if we are going to understand what Paul was trying to say to them. Then we can trans-culturally apply it to us.

We need to be careful to avoid the pitfalls of rendering a command culturally irrelevant. Some examples would be adultery and homosexuality. It is very common in American society for unmarried people to live together. Is that bad or wrong? In the first century it was considered wrong, but what about now? On both of those issues we probably have not done enough work to understand the first century. Homosexuality was actually widely accepted in the first century. To a different degree cohabitation was also accepted. If you were already married that was not good, but if you were not married the idea of fornicating was no problem in the Greco-Roman world. There were problems with both in the Jewish world because they held to the Old Testament. We need to go back to the Old Testament and see what it teaches us. Are the commands there to speak culturally to a group of people or are they there to pronounce something about the very nature of human relationships that is true for all people at all times? There are a lot of clues there for us, especially when you look at legislation such as "You shall not commit adultery." That is stated absolutely. The Ten Commandments are given absolutely. There is no cultural context with them except possibly with the Sabbath. They seem to be ahistorical.

You need to be very careful as an exegete to see if a command is intended to make a broader theme in and of itself rather than a specific application of a theme. Part of that has to do with the rationale that is used. When I look at 1 Corinthians 11, for instance, I may say that I do not have a problem with women not wearing hats in contemporary services. I have to be very careful to see that I am not just reading my culture back in and trying to put it off. I have to see that I am really getting to the meat of what is going on in 1 Corinthians 11, exegeting it well and understanding what the trans-cultural import of the text is. I must not just try to make myself feel comfortable. It is more work than you were probably assuming interpretation is when you came into this class.

There are problems and complications with interpretation because it would be easy for us to pick and choose what we want something to mean when bringing it back to our culture. We could say that we want people to wear hats in church. If we start with that we could change the text to make it whatever

we want it to mean. I understand the concern there, and I feel it as well. But we have to live there. There are churches where they do require women to wear hats. I visited a wonderful church just outside Tubingen, Germany. It was a Brethren church, and they still sat with men on one side and women on the other. The women, except for the very youngest ones, wore hats. I was tempted to come in and say, "You guys have it all wrong!" Frankly I have some problems with the idea of men and women sitting separately. But I have to be careful not to make a cultural application to them. For them, for women to wear a hat in service is a sign of respect and being under the authority of their husbands. Since that is how they conceive of it, for me to abolish that might be to work against their consciences. They are doing a better job of enacting 1 Corinthians 11 in their cultural context because it is a sign of authority just like Paul wanted it to be. In our culture it is not that sign of authority, therefore I do not think it is relevant in our culture. In their culture it might be relevant.

Another concern in interpretation is that we mistakenly understand the New Testament to be all about us as individuals. As a Christian I have to realize that part of my job is to express Scripture to people in different cultures. I need to bring them into contact with Scripture and the Lord Jesus Christ. This is not a missionary drawing. A missionary drawing would have the mission and their set of cultural assumptions. We might be tempted to bring our culture into their culture and make them like us. But that is not what the ultimate result should be. That is not what we are going for. We want them to make a cultural interpretation so that we disappear from the picture. The results for them in their culture might be different from the results for us in our culture.