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A Proper Foundation:

Understanding and Interpreting Scripture

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When it comes to interpreting the Scriptures, the Apostle Paul gave us fundamental guidance in Acts 20:27. In that verse, he told the elders at Ephesus that he had not refrained from teaching them the “whole counsel of God.” From this statement, modern biblical interpreters developed what’s called the analogy of Scripture. This means simply that the Bible interprets itself. We reference other passages of Scripture to help us determine whether our understanding of the passage we’re studying is correct. This particularly important approach protects us in two ways.

1. It guards us against arriving at faulty interpretations.
2. It prevents us from taking correct interpretations too far, thus making them faulty.

Let’s say, for example, that I am studying the book of James. In that epistle, James is extraordinarily strong on the issue of good works. So strong, in fact, that he makes two startling claims. The first is that he will show others his faith by his works (James 2:18) and the second, even more shocking, is that faith without works is lifeless (James 2:20).

If I considered only these verses, it would be quite easy to conclude that I must do good works to be saved. But when I use the analogy of Scripture, or when I, as Paul said, consider the whole counsel of God, I find that the book of Ephesians presents a very clear picture of faith and works. In that epistle, Paul said clearly that we are not saved by works but by faith (Ephesians 2:8-9). Paul’s words in Ephesians help me interpret the more difficult verses found in James.

In Ephesians, Paul added the important clarification that we are His workmanship, created to do good works (Ephesians 2:10)! Whereas Paul emphasized salvation by grace apart from works, James emphasized that faith, when genuine, will always produce good works. The truths presented by these apostles are complementary, not contradictory.

If we are truly born again, if the life of Jesus is expressed through us, then that life will produce good works in our lives. If we do not have these confirming works, our faith is pointless because it produces no fruit in our lives. In other words, it fails to fulfill the purpose for which we were born again (John 15:5). We were created brand new in Christ by grace, through faith, apart from works, so that we can produce good works. In our example, understanding the whole counsel of God keeps us from error regarding the roles of faith and works.

As I mentioned earlier, the analogy of Scripture not only protects us from false interpretation but also keeps us from stretching a true interpretation to the point that it becomes false. At this point, you might say, “Frank, what do you mean by that?” Let me give you a few examples.

It is absolutely true that God is holy. It is also absolutely true that God is loving. We must teach both as absolutely true at the same time and with the same emphasis. If we emphasize only God’s holiness, people might grow fearful of God and choose to run from Him when they fall into sin. On the flip side, if we emphasize only God’s love and neglect His holiness, people

might grow careless when they sin and choose not to take it seriously. Both pathways, when considered alone, can lead to error. But, when we consider both pathways together, we see the true and perfect balance that Scripture provides. Yes, we have full forgiveness for our choice to sin. But we must understand that our choice to sin can bring some grave consequences in our walk of faith.

Another example relates to how people view God. Some believers have an intimate view of God, seeing Him only as a Father or a Papa. Others have a more reverential view of God, seeing Him only as Sovereign King and Lord. Both views, when emphasized apart from the other, can lead to a faulty image of God. He is both Father and King, Papa and Lord, at the same time. We must emphasize both or risk falling into error.

I've seen believers who focus solely on their intimacy with God become careless, almost sloppy, in their walk with Him. They often excuse their sinful behavior as they emphasize that God is their Daddy. On the other hand, I've seen people emphasize His Lordship so intensely that they fear to come into His presence. Further, these people can be very abusive and condemning to those who struggle with sin or who are not walking in obedience. We must be incredibly careful here. Both groups of believers are walking with an incomplete, therefore, faulty view of God. He is as Scripture reveals Him to be, not as we want to see Him.

Here's one last example. In years past, the Church tended to emphasize that we were servants, but missed the glory that we were Saints. As a result, many believers trudged through life as perpetual beggars, missing out on their glorious position in Christ. In recent times, the Church has emphasized our position as Saints, those who are enthroned with Christ in the heavenlies, but have failed to lay hold of their role as servants. This has led many to walk in a lazy grace, with their eyes fixed on their glorified selves and missing the opportunity to serve others.

Did you know that we're called slaves three times as often as we're called Saints? I trust you see that teaching the whole counsel of God is as critical to gaining a correct view of ourselves, as it is to gain a correct view of God. I share this with you because I see the Church falling out of balance in a particularly important arena.

For decades the Church focused on the death of Jesus on the Cross and never moved beyond the Cross to the Resurrection. This imbalanced emphasis kept people from understanding their total forgiveness, their complete acceptance with God, their brand new identity in Christ, and their placement into an intimate relationship with the Holy Spirit. The Cross got us into heaven, the Resurrection gets heaven into us.

The Church needed to begin emphasizing the Resurrection to correct this imbalance that came from failing to teach the whole counsel of God. Fortunately, in the last decade, many wonderful Bible teachers did begin to focus on the Resurrection. This is so exciting because lives are being dynamically transformed as people are beginning to live radically from the Resurrection power of Jesus that lives in them. Teaching the whole counsel of God has restored people to the complete Good News that Jesus not only died but lives!

My fear of late, however, is that while the Resurrection is finally being emphasized, it seems to be at the expense of emphasizing the Cross. This is a crucial omission. It is impossible to have a Resurrection without first having a death. The Cross is the foundation by which all the glorious effects of the Resurrection are substantiated. Without the Cross, both Jesus' and ours through Him, there is no basis for understanding the New Covenant. If we are truly going to teach the whole counsel of God, we must emphasize both the Cross and the Resurrection in order to gain a complete understanding of what God wants to accomplish in our lives.

In his epistle to the Romans, Paul shows us the absolute necessity of the Cross as a foundation for three glorious realities of resurrection life.

First, in Romans 6:3-6, he wrote that, through the Cross, our old man, our old spirit, died. That old man was then put into the grave with Jesus, and on the third day resurrected with Jesus as a brand new creation. The death of our old self is the basis for us having a new self. Our old identity died, and we were raised in Christ with a new identity. Unfortunately, identity has become a buzzword in the Church. I hear people talk about their new identity, but they have no understanding as to why or how they got that new identity. It was because of the Cross and only because of the Cross.

Second, in Romans 6:6-14, Paul heralds the glorious reality that when our old man died, we died to the power of sin. Though Paul teaches us that sin still dwells in our flesh (Romans 7:17-18), we no longer live under its dominion. When we died with Jesus on the Cross, the relationship we had with sin as our master was brought to an end. This is the reason we can choose to not sin in our faith walk. We can say, "No" to sin, and our "No" can be emphatic because we have died to sin (Romans 6:2). Without an understanding of the Cross, we can falsely believe that we are still alive to sin and be very easy targets for our enemy to tempt us.

Third, in Romans 7:1-4, Paul declares that, when we died on the Cross, we died to the Law. The Cross completely severed our relationship to the Law. That relationship had to end, so a new relationship could be established, one in which we are now married to Jesus. When we see that our relationship to Law is over, we can embrace the new relationship we share with Jesus in the Resurrection life. Sadly, many believers proclaim zealously that they are under Grace, without an understanding of the Cross. For them, Grace is nothing more than lawlessness, the right to live in whatever fashion they want to live. Walking carelessly, and quick to excuse their faulty behavior, they model a grace that has nothing to do with the true Grace of God as found in the New Testament. The Grace of God in Christ teaches us to deny ungodliness and to live soberly and righteously in this present age (Titus 2:11-12). Those who observe their faulty behavior have rightfully concluded their grace to be "cheap grace". I believe this occurs because the people who are claiming to walk in grace have neglected to teach the whole counsel of God, thus failing to understand what it cost to bring them into Grace. The economy of Grace came to us only because our Savior shed His blood and died for us, and we died in Him. There was nothing cheap about our entering into Grace, and if we understood the cost of Grace, I believe there would be nothing cheap about our walk in Grace.

In Galatians, Paul fights fiercely and tenaciously for the Grace of God against legalism. But please don't miss his final words in chapter 6 verse 14—he glories in the Cross. He recognized that apart from the Cross there would be no new identity, there would be no freedom from the tyranny of sin, there would be no freedom from the Law, and there would be no economy of Grace.

Dear ones, we need to be careful to always teach the whole counsel of God to the glory of God. His Holy Spirit-inspired Word deserves our careful attention to establish the proper foundation for the new life we desire to live. We need to proclaim the Cross as the pre-requisite for the glorious realities of the New Covenant. We have a Savior Who died. That was our Savior's path to Resurrection life. It's ours, too.

Bless you, in the glory of the CROSS and the RESURRECTION,

*You are loved!
Pastor Frank*