

“Then This Saying Went Out”
or
--That’s Just Your Interpretation--

Franklin Church of Christ Edwin Crozier January 30, 2005 AM Worship
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Introduction:

Can you imagine being told by Jesus exactly how you will die? That happened to Peter in **John 21:18-19**. Peter would be crucified. You can imagine the kind of questions this would raise in your mind. We read one of Peter’s questions in **John 21:20-21**. “But Lord, what about this man?” According to traditional understanding of this gospel, the disciple to whom Peter referred was John. Jesus replied in **John 21:22**, “If I will that he remain till I come, what is that to you? You follow Me.” Interestingly, a saying went out among the disciples; not just a saying, a misunderstanding. According to **John 21:23**, the saying spread among the disciples that John would never die. But that is not what Jesus said. Rather, His words had been misinterpreted. We can learn some great lessons about the Bible, interpretation and truth from this.

Discussion:

- I. Bible teaching can be misinterpreted.
 - A. We should expect this. Misunderstanding the Word is not necessarily a grievous sin and error. In fact, there will be many times when we will learn we also misinterpreted something. That doesn’t mean we are beyond hope as growing Christians, it means we need to grow.
 - B. Keep in mind what interpretation is. We speak of interpretation in two similar but distinct ways.
 1. When someone speaks in a foreign language, we recognize their words must be interpreted. **I Corinthians 14:10-13** demonstrates this use of interpretation. Consider **John 1:38, 42** which show one word translated into another language. In fact, the NASB says “translated,” while the KJV says “interpreted.”
 2. Another sense in which this word is used is to give an explanation of what was meant. We see this in **Daniel 2:36ff** when Daniel interpreted Nebuchadnezzar’s dream. Also, we see an example of this in **Nehemiah 8:8**. The priests were interpreting the Law as they read it, gave the sense of it and helped the people understand it.
 - C. According to **John 21:23** mistakes can be made in this process. Knowing that should not anger us, offend us or distress us. Rather it should prepare us to be on guard.
- II. Bible teaching can be understood.
 - A. Even though an incorrect interpretation had been disseminated among the disciples, John corrected their understanding. That effort, in and of itself, demonstrates that John, by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, expected people to be able to understand the word of Christ.
 - B. Today, many try to gloss over misinterpretations by simply saying the mind of God is so vast we can never fully understand His will. When we misunderstand, they think it doesn’t matter. However, we can understand and we are expected to understand. Paul clearly expects us to in **Ephesians 3:3-4** and **5:17**.
 - C. No doubt there are things hard to understand in the Biblical teaching. But difficult and impossible are two different concepts. Even the hard things can be understood—it is our obligation to study, understand and interpret them correctly (**II Peter 3:16**).
- III. Multiple interpretations cannot all be right.
 - A. Some disciples interpreted Jesus’ statement to mean John would never die, because he would live until Jesus returned. John, however, interpreted it to mean Jesus’ plans for John were none of Peter’s business. According to John’s interpretation, Jesus’ statement was in no way a promise. It was a hypothetical statement to make a point.
 - B. Can both interpretations be correct? Of course not. Either Jesus promised John would never die or He did not. We cannot believe He was doing both. Note Paul’s statements in **II Corinthians 1:17-20**. When we proclaim the gospel correctly, we do not say both yes and no. We cannot hold contradictory positions at the same time, nor does the gospel teach such. Therefore, if you and I study the Bible and come to contradictory understandings, at the very least one of us does not understand but misunderstands. We cannot both be right. To suggest such is dishonest.

- C. Some try to gloss over the possibility of misinterpretation, misunderstanding and being mistaken by suggesting we are each allowed our own interpretation. But Peter clearly denies this in **II Peter 1:20-21**. Scripture did not come from men who were allowed to write whatever they wanted. Rather, it came as men were moved by the Spirit. In like manner, we are not allowed to believe whatever we want about scripture. We are to interpret it the way the Spirit meant it. Any other interpretation is wrong.
- D. Please understand, I often tell people not to believe, teach or practice something simply because I say it. I will even tell you to read the Bible for yourself and see if what I have taught is true (**Acts 17:11**). However, I am not saying we are each allowed to have our own interpretation. What I am saying is my interpretation may be wrong. If it is, you do what the Bible says, not what I say. If I am wrong, then you need to tell me. This leads to the next lesson.

IV. Misinterpretations and misunderstandings need to be corrected.

- A. **John 21:23** demonstrates one of the first misinterpretations among Christ's disciples. Though this misunderstanding is seemingly insignificant, John wanted people to interpret it correctly.
- B. That is what growth is all about. In **I Peter 2:2**, Peter says he wants babes in Christ to desire the milk of the word and grow. What is that but bringing our understanding in line with Christ's word? In **II Peter 1:5**, he talks about adding knowledge to our virtue and faith. Paul nails it down in **I Corinthians 14:20**. We are to be mature in our understanding.
- C. When we misunderstand and misinterpret something we need to be corrected—if for no other reason than it is better to be right than to be wrong. However, we need to learn that in many cases it is not just about being right or wrong. Rather, it is about being right or being lost.

V. Some misinterpretations are destructive.

- A. I do not believe any disciples lost their souls because of their misinterpretation of **John 21:22**. However, we need to be very clear that many misinterpretations cost people their souls.
- B. In **II Peter 3:16**, we are warned not to twist the scriptures. If we do, it will be to our destruction. Peter did not say this about malicious and devious people, but about ignorant people who had not learned the truth. They were untaught and unstable. In **II Peter 2:1**, Peter mentions destructive heresies. According to Strong's Enhanced Lexicon, this word translated heresy means "dissensions arising from diversity of opinions and aims." In other words, the opinion or interpretation of some people is destructive. Consider some times when this is so.
 1. According to **II Peter 2:2**, if the interpretation leads to reviling the truth, it is destructive.
 2. According to **II Timothy 2:17-18**, if an interpretation leads people away from faith in the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit or their word, then it is destructive.
 3. According to **II Peter 2:18-22**, if the interpretation leads a Christian back into the ways of uncleanness and sin, then it is destructive.
 4. According to **Matthew 7:21-23**, if the interpretation leads us to do something other than God's will, it is destructive. If it leads you to disregard or disobey God's will, it is destructive.
 5. According to **II Peter 3:17-18**, if the interpretation leads you to fall from your own steadfastness, then it is destructive.
 6. According to **Galatians 1:6-10**, if the interpretation distorts the gospel of Christ causing you to try to be saved in some way other than Christ's way, then it is destructive.
 7. Do you begin to see a pattern here? If the interpretation causes you to turn from God's path and follow some other path, it is destructive.

VI. Scripture corrects misinterpretations.

- A. In **John 21:23**, we actually see the best method for correcting a misinterpretation. I believe this method applies whether or not the misinterpretation is destructive. What did John do to correct the disciples' understanding? He simply went back to what Jesus said. Remember what it says in **II Timothy 3:16-17**. The Scripture came from God and is profitable for teaching, reproof and instruction in righteousness. But notice the second thing Paul mentioned. It is profitable for correction. When we misinterpret, we need to go back to the Bible.
- B. I understand that this simple misunderstanding was based on one statement and many misinterpretations are based on more complex issues than that. So, as we go back to the word

we have to keep some keys of biblical interpretation in mind. We must remember to take everything the scripture says on any subject. We must keep in mind the context of the passage we are interpreting. We must keep in mind the biblical context and harmony of scripture. We cannot interpret any scripture to contradict other scriptures. We must keep in mind who is writing, to whom they are writing and in what context they are writing. We need to remember the genre of the writing—is it prose, poetry, parable or some other kind of writing? We must keep these things in mind, but the key is that we must go back to the Bible. And we must understand that we can go back to the Bible and understand what it says. We do not have to have a seminary education. We do not have to have theology degrees. We do not have to be able to write books or appear on television shows. We simply need to be able to go back to the Bible and see what it says. That is what we should believe.

Conclusion:

As we conclude, let's take a look at another passage. It is a passage that is interpreted several different ways. And since it is one that talks about our salvation, I believe it is one we must interpret correctly lest we deny the gospel of Christ (**Galatians 1:6-10**). Let's look at the passage and you tell me what Jesus meant when He said in **Mark 16:16**, "He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned." There are several ways people interpret this passage. The skeptical interpretation of this verse is that we are not even sure if this verse should be here, so its proper interpretation doesn't matter. The Catholic interpretation of this verse is that an infant is baptized and therefore saved, then they will believe later. The typical Protestant interpretation of this verse is, if someone believes they are saved. They may get baptized later for some reason or other. The Calvinistic interpretation is that a person is saved because God has chosen them to be saved, then as one of the elect God has predestined them to later believe and be baptized. The Universalist interpretation says everyone is saved anyway and some may believe and get baptized.

All of these interpretations cannot be correct. What should we believe? Let's just go back and look at what it says. It says "he who believes and is baptized." I interpret that to mean someone who believes and is baptized. The text says, "will be saved." I interpret that to mean that the one who believes and is baptized will be saved. Then the text says, "he who does not believe." I take that to mean Jesus is now talking about someone who does not believe. Jesus said, "will be condemned." I interpret that to mean that someone who does not believe will be condemned. This is not confusing. This is not hard. I know that lots of people do not see it this way. But, I think Jesus simply meant what He said. If you want to be condemned, then do not believe. If you want to be saved, then believe and be baptized. Does it really matter how confused the religious world is on this text. You can see it. Why not obey it? This is not just a matter of interpretation; this is a matter of believing Jesus. It is a matter of salvation (**cf. Matthew 15:8-9**).