

# PART THREE: UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE

## CHAPTER 3

### FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES FOR INTERPRETING THE BIBLE

#### 1.-ASK FOR LIGHT TO UNDERSTAND IT

"Holy Scripture must be read and interpreted in the sacred spirit  
in which it was written"

(SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Dei Verbum 12)

Logically, if the Bible **is not a simple human word**, but is an inspiration of the Holy Spirit (and therefore the Word of God), in order to understand it in depth, **it is not enough to apply a merely human study** (no matter how advanced and specialized it may be). **We need God to enlighten us** so that we understand all that he wanted to tell us through the inspired texts. Notice that the apostles themselves, despite being with Jesus day and night, could not understand the Holy Scriptures deeply until Jesus gave them a special light so that they could do so:

*Then he opened their understanding to understand the Scriptures (Luke 24:45)*

It is not enough to read and study the Bible. It is necessary to ask God to enlighten us in order to understand it in depth, because its perfect understanding overcomes merely natural forces.

#### 2.-LOOK AT THE WHOLE OF WRITING

The Church asks us to pay great attention "to the content and unity of the whole Scripture" (SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Dei Verbum 12)

**We cannot focus on a single message of the Bible and forget the rest.** For example, the Bible asks us to help people in need. But he also asks us to work for the eternal salvation of our soul. If a person were only concerned with helping others but never worked for the salvation of his soul (praying, fighting temptations, observing the commandments), he would be making an incorrect interpretation of the Bible since he would not be attending to the whole of Scripture. The same would happen if the opposite happened: a person who only cares about the salvation of his soul and totally forgets to help the needy.

### 3. JESUS IS THE FULL AND DEFINITIVE REVELATION

Not all books of the Bible have the same value. The Old Testament was a preparation for the new and eternal covenant that God made with all mankind through Jesus. That is why **the New Testament has greater importance than the Old**. Likewise, within the 27 books that make up the New Testament, **the four Gospels have a special relevance**, since in them we find the deeds and teachings of Jesus.

We cannot forget that Jesus is God made man. In Him God transmits revelation to us in fullness. There is no fuller or more perfect revelation than that offered by Jesus.

“The New Testament, whose central object is Jesus Christ, conveys to us the ultimate truth of divine Revelation. Within the New Testament the four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are the heart of all the Scriptures because they are the principle witness to the life and teaching of Jesus. As such, they hold a unique place in the Church” (COMPENDIUM OF THE CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH 22)

For this reason, the Old Testament, which contains a non-full revelation, **must always be read in the light of the New Testament**, since with the coming of Jesus God gave us full and definitive revelation. To understand the Old Testament exactly, it must always be interpreted with the teachings of the New Testament.

This helps us to solve a question that many believers have: "How to interpret the imperfect moral teachings of the Old Testament?" God, with great patience, guided the people of Israel (little by little) towards a fuller and more absolute understanding of the truths He wanted to reveal. Such a revelation is fully completed with Jesus.

Let's look at an example: God wanted to reveal to us the importance of loving one another, and even inviting us to love our enemies. But he had to reveal this truth (difficult for many people to admit) little by little. At first he said:

*Eye for eye, tooth for tooth* (Exodus 21, 24)

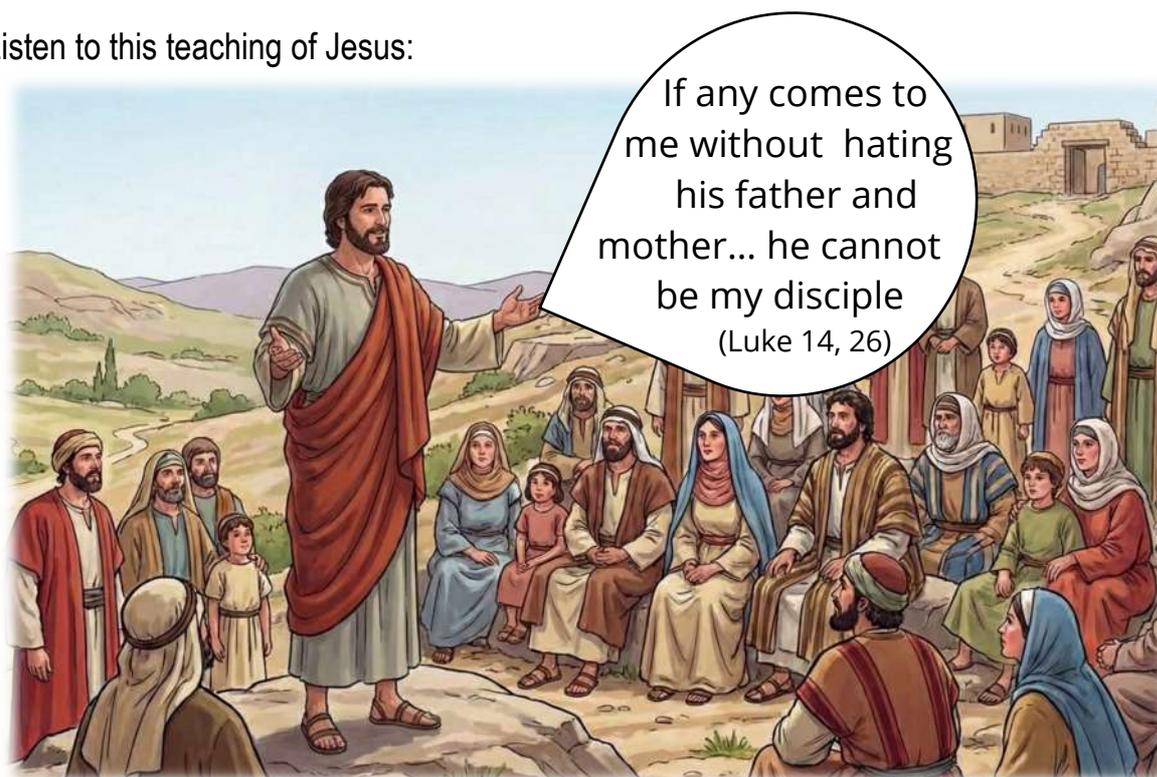
This teaching, although it may not seem like it, was already an advance in charity. At the time it was said, people were terribly barbaric: if someone stole a sheep from them, they, in revenge, murdered the thief's children. This instruction was already a containment of revenge and hatred because it came to say: "Do not return more than what has been done to you".

However, it was still a revelation that was not complete. God wanted to give us a more perfect teaching about charity toward others. Therefore, with the coming of Jesus, the full and definitive Truth on the matter was revealed:

*You have heard that it was said: "Eye for eye, tooth for tooth"... But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you* (Matthew 5, 38. 44)

#### 4.-TEXTS THAT ARE DIFFICULT TO INTERPRET ARE EXPLAINED IN THE LIGHT OF EASY TEXTS

Listen to this teaching of Jesus:



Does Jesus ask us to hate our parents? But in the Bible the fourth commandment is very clear, which Jesus also teaches elsewhere: *Honor your father and your mother (Matthew 19:19)*. Therefore, to interpret this obscure text (an invitation to hate our parents) **we must look at the whole of the Bible and explain it on the basis of clear and simple texts**. Since the Bible clearly asks us to love our parents, this one time it asks us to hate them must have some special meaning. God does not contradict himself. If we investigate more deeply the literal meaning of the word used in this text ("hate") we discover that at that time this word, according to the Aramaic way of speaking, could mean "to love less". Jesus, therefore, is not saying that we hate our parents (as we understand the word *hatred* today). He is teaching that one should always prefer God to any human being. If your father or mother tries to take you away from God, God comes before them. That is: parents must be "loved less" than God. The most correct translation of this passage would be, "*If anyone comes to me and does not **put off** his father and mother...*" And in fact many Bibles translate it that way.

#### 5.-ATTEND TO LITERARY GENRES

That is: the ways of speaking and expressing oneself typical of the time in which the biblical texts were written. Given the importance of this matter in interpreting the Bible correctly, and in order that it may be understood with the greatest clarity, we will devote a separate chapter to explaining it.

As the ultimate rule "all of what has been said about the way of interpreting Scripture is subject finally to the judgment of the Church, which carries out the divine commission and ministry of guarding and interpreting the word of God"(SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, *Dei Verbum* 12).