

The Clarity of Scripture

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[0 : 01] So we are continuing in this Sunday School series on the doctrine of the Word. So if you've been with us, you're familiar with what we've been doing. We've been looking at what does the Word teach us about itself.

And we've looked at different attributes of the Word. So the first week together we considered just the love and affection that we want for the Word. We want to love it. We want to cherish it. We want to adore what God has said to us, just like the psalmist in Psalm 119. And then we considered in the weeks following these particular attributes that help us to understand what the Word teaches about itself.

And so the first was inspiration. The fact that this is a divine book that men wrote as they were carried along by the Spirit. That same week we unpacked the inerrancy of Scripture, that it is without error.

And that it is also infallible, meaning that it is incapable of erring. Last week we looked at the sufficiency of Scripture, that it gives us what we need.

[1 : 08] It is enough for life and godliness. Well, this morning we are going to unpack the clarity of Scripture. The fact that the Scriptures are clear.

Now, ironically, this doctrine has also been called the perspicuity of Scripture. But that is a word that is not super clear. So I won't say it frequently. Occasionally those I quote say it.

But perspicuity simply means that it's clear. So the clarity of Scripture. Let me give you the outline for this morning.

We are going to define the attribute. We are going to see it defended by Scripture itself. And then we are going to consider the damage if we lose this attribute.

Or if we set it aside. Or if we fail to believe that it is indeed clear. So the three D's for this morning. Define, defend, and damage. So let's look at the definition of clarity.

[2 : 07] What do we mean by this? This is what we mean. What you most need to know in the Bible, you can know using ordinary means.

The Scriptures are able to be understood. They are clear on the most essential truths that they teach. So much so that indeed a child can come to faith.

And where they are not as abundantly clear, you can grow in your understanding of them over time with careful study. Or to express it another way, John Frame in his systematic theology unpacked it using this kind of language.

That God has successfully and accurately communicated with us. So this is what Frame says. God is fully in control of his communications to human beings.

When he intends to communicate with a human being, he is always able to do it successfully. But another name for successful communication is clarity.

[3 : 11] An unclear word is one that does not succeed, that fails to accomplish its purpose. But we know that God's word always accomplishes its purpose.

Therefore, his word is always clear. And what did even John Frame allude to in that quote? He alluded to Isaiah 55, verses 10 to 11, which read, So this is the clarity of Scripture that we're speaking of.

God successfully communicating to us. This doctrine is also unpacked in our confession of faith. And so I want to read that and then consider some truths, three of them that our confession is teaching.

This is what our confession says. The contents of the Scripture vary in their degree of clarity. And some men have a better understanding of them than others.

Yet those things which are essential to man's salvation and which must be known, believed, and obeyed are so clearly propounded and explained in one place or another that men educated or uneducated may attain to a sufficient understanding of them if they but use the ordinary means. [4 : 47] So what is it that our confession is teaching? Let's consider these three truths. The first is that some things are easier to understand than others in the Scriptures.

Some passages of Scripture spell out truth more plainly, more simply. Some passages of Scripture teach truth that is more complex and more difficult to understand.

So while Scripture is clear, it is not all equally clear. The Apostle Peter himself talked about this in 2 Peter 3.

He basically said, I'm easier to understand than the Apostle Paul. Listen to his words, 2 Peter 3, beginning in verse 15. And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters.

There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures.

[5 : 55] Interesting, though, that Peter doesn't say, there are some things that are hard to understand, and then goes on to say, the ignorant and unstable don't understand them.

He says the ignorant and unstable twist them. So even in that, even in saying that they're hard to understand, I'm losing my mic here, he is yet still saying they understand them enough to twist them.

You can still twist what Paul is saying, even if what Paul says is a little bit harder to understand. So, not all Scripture is equally easy to understand.

Some people have a better understanding of certain parts of Scripture than other people. The Lord may have gifted one with a greater degree of intelligence than another.

One reason that I love Kevin DeYoung is because he is an incredibly intelligent man. And so, as we go through this study on the doctrine of the Word, the Lord has given him as a gift to the universal church to better understand the doctrine of Scripture.

[6 : 57] The Lord has also given some the opportunity to be able to study out passages longer and to give more time to it than others. So, for one reason or another, some people do have a better understanding of certain parts of Scripture than other people.

And some of Scripture is easier to understand. And some of it is harder to understand. That's the first truth that we need to see that our confession teaches. Here's the second.

Though some passages of Scripture are less clear than others, the most important truths of Scripture are taught to us in an abundantly clear fashion.

The Gospel is made plain. Sinners in need of a Savior. That is what we are. Jesus is that Savior who died in our place that our sins might be forgiven.

That is plain. We must believe on the Lord Jesus Christ in order to be saved. That is plain. Not all Scripture is clear, but the essential message is.

[8 : 01] John 3.16 captures that clear message. John Frame said it this way, The clarity of Scripture pertains to those fundamentals that constitute a credible profession of Christ.

So, Scripture is clear on the essentials. That's the second truth. Let's consider the third truth. We must use means to understand the Scriptures.

Ordinary people, using ordinary means of study and learning, can know, believe, and obey the most important truths in God's Word.

Now, having said that, let me give this caveat that we've talked about a few times, and that is this. All of this is said with the understanding that the Holy Spirit must open our eyes and give us spiritual life.

We only understand and believe and embrace because the Spirit has given us that life. God must do as 2 Corinthians 4.6 teaches.

[9 : 14] Shine in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. God gives that light.

And there are times in which God withholds understanding. We see that when Jesus teaches in the parables. He teaches so that those that are not to believe would not understand.

He spoke in a way that made it so they wouldn't. Matthew 11.25 Jesus said, I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and

revealed them to little children.

So God must give understanding for us to believe and embrace what is said in the Scriptures. So keeping that in mind, the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit, this doctrine, the clarity of Scripture, emphasizes human responsibility.

The Scriptures are clear, so we must study and learn what they teach. God has communicated to us we can understand, so we need to seek to understand.

[10:27] This is what it means for us to use ordinary means. And when we do that, we can understand the Bible, we can grow in our understanding of the Bible.

It is not unknowable. I appreciate how Wayne Grudem explains this. He says in his own systematic theology, we might say then that we do understand Scripture because it is able to be understood. And we are always seeking to understand Scripture more fully because it is always able to be understood more fully. It is that idea that yes, a child can come to faith and at the same time, in our old age, walking with the Lord for decades and decades and decades, he is continuing to teach us from his word.

We never fully arrive at all that we could mind the depths of his word. So our understanding of Scripture is a growing process. Think about all the times that the Scriptures call us to meditate on the word, to think on what the word teaches.

Think about the times where even Paul in his prayers concerning other churches will say something to the effect of, my prayer is that you would increase in your knowledge of God.

[11:47] So we are to increase. We are to grow in our understanding of the word which is clear. Okay, we've defined what the clarity of Scripture is.

Now let's see it defended in the word. Do you have your Bibles? You can open up and turn to Deuteronomy chapter 30. Deuteronomy chapter 30.

In the book of Deuteronomy, Israel is on the cusp of entering of entering the promised land. And it's really the second time that they're on the cusp of entering the promised land.

And Moses, as God's mouthpiece, is reminding Israel of everything that God has said. The whole book is very much a rehearsing of remember what God has said.

Remember the commandments that God has given to you. Now this is vitally important. It's a matter of life and death. Obey God's commandments and you will enjoy life and blessing in the promised land.

[13:01] Disobey God's commandments and you can expect judgment and expulsion from the land. So it's crucial that Israel know and obey what God has said.

You can't obey what is unclear. And so this is the point that we're going to see in Deuteronomy 30. It is possible to obey God's commandments because they are clear.

But let's not take my word for it. Let's read it. And we're going to read beginning in verse 11. This is the word of the Lord. For this commandment that I command you today is not too hard for you, neither is it far off.

It is not in heaven that you should say, who will ascend to heaven for us and bring it to us that we might hear it and do it? Neither is it beyond the sea that you should say, who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us that we may hear it and do it?

But the word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart so that you can do it. So God is telling the Israelites His commandments are not unattainable.

[14:10] They're not far away. They're not over the ocean. They're not in the heavens. They're not somewhere where they're saying if only we knew what He said, we could obey.

He's saying, they're right here. I've given them to you. And if I've given them to you and I expect you to obey them, then you must be able to understand them.

That would be cruel of God to give His commandments and then to say, you have them, but they're not clear. You better obey them even if you can't understand them. So DeYoung, in his book Taking God at His Word, summarizes this by saying, the picture of the Word of God in Deuteronomy 30, 11-14 is of something that can be comprehended clearly.

That's just one place. Let's look at some other places where the Scriptures teach that it is clear. Psalm 119. I think we've had a nice running theme of Psalm 119 every week.

We've got to keep this going. Psalm 119, verse 105 says, Your Word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. Very similarly, verse 130, The unfolding of your words gives light.

[15 : 28] It imparts understanding to the simple. So if God's Word couldn't be understood, how could it impart understanding? If we can't even know what it says, how then will we grow in understanding from it?

1 John 1-5 This is the message. God is light and in Him is no darkness at all. If God is light, it's understandable to then conclude, His Word gives light.

It can be understood. Maybe you remember 2 Chronicles 34. Josiah and the rediscovery of the law. It was preached a few months ago here in our morning service and as we looked at that passage, we saw that the law had been lost for decades and decades and decades.

And when they were doing some work on the temple, the law was rediscovered. And so the book of the law was brought to the king, King Josiah at that time and it was read to him. And then, he went and he read it to all of Israel.

[16 : 40] So, listen, beginning in verse 30. If you'd like to turn there, 2 Chronicles 34, we're going to read beginning in verse 30 and we want to listen for how the people respond when the law is read to them.

How do the people respond when the law is read? 2 Chronicles 34 beginning in verse 30.

And the king went up to the house of the Lord with all the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem and the priests and the Levites, all the people, both great and small.

And he read in their hearing all the words of the book of the covenant that had been found in the house of the Lord. And the king stood in his place and made a covenant before the Lord to walk after the Lord and to keep his commandments and his testimonies and his statutes with all his heart and all his soul to perform the words of the covenant that were written in this book.

Then he made all who were present in Jerusalem and in Benjamin join in it. And the inhabitants of Jerusalem did according to the covenant of God, the God of their fathers. So again, they had been without the law for all of these years.

[17 : 59] It is rediscovered, it's read, and what do they do? They say, we're going to obey it. We're going to do what it says. They don't wring their hands and say, the meaning is lost on us.

It's been so long, we can't possibly know what this actually means. They don't respond at all in that fashion. Josiah is grieved when he realizes we've been disobeying the law.

We have been not doing what it clearly tells us we need to do. So when the Bible gives us examples like this of the public reading of Scripture, the Bible is telling us it can be understood by great and small.

That's this idea of all people in a general fashion, from the youngest to the oldest, from the educated to the uneducated. They can understand what the Scripture says.

1 Timothy 4.13 gives the exhortation, not just the example, but the exhortation to read the Scriptures publicly. Jesus himself, he assumed the clarity of Scripture during his earthly ministry.

[19 : 11] Over and over again, Jesus would quote the Old Testament and he would do it to drive home a point. He would do it to settle a matter of potential debate.

And not once, Wayne Grudem says, does Jesus respond like this. Never do we hear Jesus saying anything like, I sympathize with your frustrations.

The Scriptures relevant to this topic contain unusually complex interpretive difficulties that have puzzled scholars for many years. He never says that.

This is what Jesus frequently says. All of this is from the book of Matthew. I'm going to say this in just quick succession. Listen to how Jesus speaks. Have you not read what David did?

Have you not read in the law? Have you never read in the Scriptures? Have you not read what was said to you by God? You are wrong because you neither know the Scriptures nor the power of God.

[20 : 12] Then on the road to Emmaus, Luke 24, O foolish ones and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken. Jesus assumed his hearers would understand in the main what the Scriptures taught.

What he didn't assume is that his hearers read the word carefully. What he didn't assume is that his hearers believed the word that they read.

But he always assumed you can understand what they say. For Jesus, the Scriptures were clear. We need to read them. We need to believe them.

De Young writes this, Jesus approached God's written revelation as if it could be known and understood. And the apostles did the same, quoting from the Scriptures, reasoning from them, alluding to them, and finding the fulfillment of them, all with the assumption that these texts had a

correct meaning and that the apostles were in possession of that meaning.

Okay, so we've seen this attribute defined. We've seen it defended. Now let's consider the damage if we set it aside. If we say, you know what? Disregarding what the Scriptures teach about their own clarity, the Scriptures aren't clear.

[21 : 35] what's the damage? What's at stake? De Young gives us three things that are at stake if we set aside this attribute of Scripture. First, human language is at stake.

So if we think that the Scriptures can't be understood, then we are saying that the vehicle that God has chosen to use to communicate Himself to us is inadequate.

And that vehicle is human language. Who invented human language? God did. Who spoke first? God did.

He spoke everything into being. What did God do to communicate to Adam His commands? He used human language. He spoke to him. In the Garden of Eden, when Satan showed up on the scene, what did Satan do to try to make doubt creep into Eve's heart?

He challenged the clarity of Scripture. Satan's first words to her. Did God actually say? Are you sure that you know and understand what God said?

[22 : 49] Did He really say what you think He said? Do we have clarity on the matter here, Eve? Or are we clear on what He said? Did He actually say this? Listen to De Young.

If we are created in the image of God, then it stands to reason that we are fit conversation partners for the God who began the universe by speaking. Human language is a divinely created means whereby God from the very beginning intended to make Himself and His ways known.

So the gift of human language that God has given us, that's at stake if we deny the clarity of Scripture. If we set aside our belief in it, we are saying that human language is not an adequate vehicle for God to communicate to us.

That's important. And this leads very naturally to the second thing that is at stake. What God is like. We need to see the connection here.

If God cannot communicate with us as He intends using human language, if He is not successful at clear communication, then we can't actually know with any degree of certainty what He is like.

[24 : 04] You might be familiar with the story of the six blind men who come upon an elephant and they touch different parts of the elephant not knowing that it's an elephant.

And so one man, he touches the tail and he thinks, I'm touching a rope. Another man touches the belly and he thinks, I'm touching a wall. A third man, he goes and he touches an ear and he thinks that it's like a fan.

And so the point of the story is this, that we're all just kind of feeling our way to God. We know something of what He's like but we don't really know what He is or who He is.

The story is used to often argue that there are many ways to God. Here's where the story breaks down. For one thing, the story itself is told from the vantage point that the narrator knows it's an elephant and the narrator tells us this is an elephant.

So we're already given the fact there's an elephant here. But even more importantly, what if this elephant could talk? And what if that elephant spoke to each man and told each man, this is what you are touching.

[25 : 22] That's my tail. That's my ear. That's my belly. That's not a wall. Then, these men would have understanding. Well, I think we see the connection here.

God has spoken. And what He says is clear. And if what He says is clear, then we can know what He is like. We aren't grasping in the dark for understanding.

He's given that understanding to us. He's successfully and accurately communicated with us. All right. Here is the third thing that is at stake if we deny the clarity of Scripture.

And it is the gift of human freedom. What do we mean by this? Well, DeYoung unpacks it in these ways. If the Scriptures are not understood in a general sense, then we shouldn't read our Bibles ourselves.

If Scripture isn't clear, if it's obscure, then ordinary people need to have it interpreted for them. They need it to be explained for them.

[26 : 26] They shouldn't have a Bible in their hands. That's dangerous business if the Scriptures aren't clear. Now, we need to be careful. DeYoung recognizes this. There's a balance.

Teachers are good. Even education, very well, good. Scripture teaches us with clarity that leadership in the church who teach us God's Word are part of God's good design for the church, but

not to the abandonment of personal study and coming to personal convictions about what the Scriptures teach.

Listen to how DeYoung says it. Implicit in the affirmation of Scripture's clarity is the recognition that individuals have the responsibility and the ability to interpret Scripture for themselves, not apart from community or without attention to history and tradition and scholarship, but in the final analysis, the doctrine of perspicuity means that I should not be forced to go against my own conscience.

In other words, we need shepherds to guide us, but we should have personal convictions based on our own careful study of what the Word teaches.

We can and we should come to a personal understanding of the Scriptures. But if the Scriptures aren't clear, then we can't know.

[27 : 56] We can't understand what they teach. And therefore, we would have to have others tell us what they mean. This last week was the anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation back in 1517.

And at the heart of the Reformation was this idea that ordinary people, by ordinary means, could understand the Word and live in obedience to it.

For centuries, the Catholic Church had told people what to believe and how to live because the Catholic Church taught the Scriptures couldn't be understood by ordinary people, by ordinary means.

You needed somebody to teach the interpretation to you because you could not arrive at a proper interpretation yourself. That cuts against the idea that the Scriptures are clear.

DeYoung says, the biblical doctrine of perspicuity can be abused, but a raft of bad interpretations and the sometimes free-for-all of Protestantism is worth the price of reading the Bible for ourselves according to our God-given and imperfect consciences.

[29 : 15] Maybe you've heard of William Tyndale. William Tyndale lived in the 16th century, born in the 15th. And he served almost as kind of a precursor to the Reformation, but he was very much involved in what the Reformation was after.

He believed the Scriptures were clear. So much so that he said, we have to get the Scriptures translated into the common language of the people. The people need to be able to have the Bible in their hands.

Now, of course, not everyone agreed with him. In fact, it would get him killed for what he believed.

One day, he was arguing with someone who, in his words, he called a learned man.

He was arguing with this learned man about this very doctrine that the Scriptures are clear, can be understood, and so people need to have Bibles in their hands. And this is what he said in some English that's a little bit hard to understand.

If God spare my life many years, I will cause a boy that driveth the plow shall know more of Scripture than thou dost.

[30 : 27] Meaning, you learned man, if we can get these Scriptures into the hands of even a little boy, we're going to see that he could know even more than you, you learned man, because the Scriptures are clear.

Sounds like Jesus is, or it sounds like Tyndale was paraphrasing Jesus' words that we already heard from Matthew 11. I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children.

So is God's Word clear? Can it be understood? Well, it says itself that it is clear. It can be understood. So the question is, do we want to hear what God's Word has to say?

And that's what we're going to get into next week. the authority of Scripture because there is this tight connection between the clarity of Scripture and the authority of Scripture.

Listen to John Frame. To say that God's Word has authority is to say that it creates obligations in its hearers. Obligations to believe what it says, to do what it commands, to write it on our hearts, and so on.

[31 : 40] The clarity of God's Word means that we have no excuse for failing to meet those demands. To say that God's Word is clear is to say that we have no excuse for misunderstanding or disobeying it.

And so, we're going to see next week that because God's Word is clear, it therefore holds authority over our lives. And so, as we read it, as we grow in our understanding of it, we have to listen to

what it says.

We have to obey it and do what it says. And of course, that requires God's great help in our lives. We can't do that in our own strength.

And so, let's pray together that God would help us to that end. Heavenly Father, we thank you for the testimony of your Word, that you do teach us by it, that you have successfully communicated to us in your Word, that your Word does not return void.

It accomplishes exactly what it sets out to do. We also understand even now as we look to next week that that puts a burden, a good burden on us that we are then to obey it.

[32 : 53] We're to listen to what it says. And so, Father, we pray that you would be our help. Help us to understand it. Help us to be dedicated and disciplined in reading it.

Help us to believe it, to submit ourselves to it. And we thank you, Lord, that you've revealed yourself. You were under no obligation to do that, and yet in your kindness you have.

And so, Father, make us to be a people who are grateful for your Word and who live in obedience to it and who seek to understand and know it more and more. Give us hearts that yearn to meditate on your Word that we might, like the psalmist, delight in it.

We pray all these things in the marvelous name of your Son. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

We are doing