

The Interpretive Process: How do we Know that we Know?

Please turn to Matthew 5. We are going to start looking at the Sermon on the Mount. We will spend 10 minutes total on the Sermon on the Mount, so this is not going to be very in depth. I want to highlight some things here regarding the theology of Matthew. That is one of the themes. We are looking at particular New Testament authors and seeing their theological emphases. We are expecting these to cohere with the rest of the New Testament. I am not trying to say that Matthew should be pitted against Mark or Luke, but there are some emphases that should be made. You can see this already when you get to the Sermon on the Mount. You can see it well before; you will remember we talked about worship in Matthew 2. In Matthew 5 we enter into the Sermon on the Mount. This is a famous three-chapter series of sayings and teachings of Jesus. One of the ways we see that this is distinct from the other authors is by comparing Matthew with another author—Mark, for example. Matthew has collected together a lot of the teachings of Jesus, many of which are not found in Mark. The same plot line is in both. There are some striking similarities between Mark and Matthew, but Matthew has a lot of teaching isolated in five major discourses. This is the first of five major sets of teachings of Jesus in the book of Matthew.

If you were to compare that to Luke, you would see that many of the same teachings appear in Luke, but they are spread out over the ministry of Jesus. Matthew seems to bring them together in these great sermonic passages. Luke tends to have Jesus saying the same things as He is walking along with His disciples, especially as they are on their way to Jerusalem at the very end of Jesus' ministry. The bulk of the Gospel of Luke is Jesus walking with His disciples on the way to Jerusalem, on His way to the cross. That is what is going on in Luke. Almost certainly Jesus taught these things repeatedly. That is what you would do if you were a traveling teacher in the ancient world, and it is what you would do if you were a rabbi in the ancient world. We can expect that Jesus said these things a lot. He probably said them as long, sermonic discourses as well as with His disciples on the way to Jerusalem. I do not find these pitted against one another. One of the results in Matthew is that you have these coherent sermons that tend to be topically organized. One of the last sermons (in Matthew 24), which is also in Mark, has to do with the eschaton.

In the Sermon on the Mount, there are several different themes that come up. It is not all on one topic, and it is not a single sermon like we think of a single sermon. There are several themes that come up, and we see these in the beginning of Matthew 5 in the Beatitudes. We are going to go through the Beatitudes in two minutes, which means we cannot do them justice. I am going to highlight one of the Beatitudes, the one I think Matthew is highlighting. Let us read these together. Jesus is teaching the disciples. There are multitudes around, but there are also the disciples. It is possible that He has a wider audience, but He is speaking especially to His disciples. Matthew 5:1-12 says,

Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them, saying:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful,

for they will be shown mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called sons of God.
Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Each one, except for the last, has a parallel structure. There is a blessing pronounced on a group of people who are identified by a certain character trait. The blessing is then rooted in a rationale. It says what they will receive because of that character trait. For instance, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." The poor in spirit are the people who are blessed, and the reason is that theirs is the kingdom of heaven. One of things that we like to do with this is work these out almost as if they are separate groups of people. There are those who are poor in spirit, those who mourn, those who are gentle, and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. But that is clearly not Jesus' intent. Let me give you a couple of reasons for it. One, the results that accrue to people are all basically relationally connected to God. "For theirs is the kingdom of heaven," "for they shall be comforted" (presumably by the Lord; He is the great Comforter), "for they shall inherit the earth," "for they shall be satisfied," "for they shall receive mercy," "for they shall see God," "for they shall be called sons of God." There is no difference between seeing God and being called sons of God. There is a heightening that is going on in terms of the blessings that are accruing to these people. If that is the case, these are the character traits that God's people are to manifest: being poor in spirit, mourning, being gentle, hungering and thirsting for righteousness, being merciful, being pure in heart, being peacemakers. You can see that all of this fits together. You cannot pick out and say you are going to be a peacemaker and somebody else is going to be a person who is gentle. You cannot hunger and thirst for righteousness yet not be pure in heart. These all fit together. You can see that.

I said that the one I really wanted to study is the one Matthew highlights. He does so because Jesus highlights it in the passage. If you look through this whole passage, let us talk about which of the blessings is the most emphasized. We see that Matthew highlights the blessing of when you are persecuted because there is a lot more material there and it is the last one. My Bible sorts this out into eight blessings. The question is whether verse 11 constitutes a ninth blessing or not. It has the same theme, "Blessed are you..." There are some reasons to set this out as a group of eight. In particular, if you count them down, the fourth blessing is "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness." Then we count another set of four and we get to "Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness." The term "righteousness" comes up both times. It is possibly structured along a series of four. That is not to say that He reiterates the same four twice, but both times He ends up with righteousness. The first time they thirst for righteousness. The second time they are persecuted for the sake of righteousness.

When we think of the Beatitudes I get a warm, fuzzy feeling in my heart. We think, "Jesus is blessing His people." And He is doing that. But it is important to realize that part of His blessing to His people is in the context of a warning that they are going to be persecuted. He blesses them in the midst of that persecution. This coheres very well with what you see going on in Matthew. Very soon after this Jesus has had it all right up to now in Matthew. There is soon going to be a turn in which part of Israel turns against the Messiah. Those who follow are going to increasingly see the kind of persecution that they are

going to be called to endure. Therefore Jesus, at the beginning of His Sermon on the Mount, does not picture a rosy Christianity. He pictures a very real and brutal Christianity for people who are persecuted. Yet in the midst of that there is great blessing: “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” “Kingdom of heaven” is commonly used in Matthew, whereas Luke often says “kingdom of God” in the very same kind of setting. One of the things that is going on there is Matthew has a much more Jewish feel to it. He is probably speaking to Jewish Christians. One of the things that you do not want to do if you are Jewish is say “God.” In America we say “God” all the time. We say, “God bless you.” “God bless America.” We do not have any problem with saying it. Among Jewish people it was a more holy thing to pronounce God’s name or to even refer to Him. Instead of saying God, they used various circumlocutions. God dwells in heaven, so when you refer to the kingdom of heaven you are referring to the kingdom of God. “Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” You see this theme of the persecution of God’s people.

Perhaps this is a rather disheartening way to begin our second lesson together. At the same time it is a very important theme in Matthew. I would ultimately argue that it is a huge theme throughout the New Testament. It is one we do not tend to identify with very well because we do not endure that kind of suffering. We can be thankful to the Lord that that is the case. At the same time, there are Christians all around this world who are persecuted significantly for their faith. We should pray for them and for their release from persecution. Yet in the midst of that we recognize God’s blessing on them as well.

Let me lead us in prayer.

Father, as we come before You we are thankful. We are thankful that You pronounce an eschatological blessing on Your people. You promise Your people even the kingdom of heaven. You promise Your people that we can be called sons of God. You promise Your people that in the midst even of persecution there is great blessing. Father, we pray for our brothers and sisters around the world and even those brothers and sisters listening to this audio who may be undergoing real persecution. We pray that you would comfort them with these words of Jesus that indeed there is blessing. Indeed, eschatologically speaking, in a few years they will know for sure the abundance of the kingdom of heaven. Father, may we live in light of that eschatological blessing, and may we be agents of spreading that blessing to others as they recognize and bow the knee to our Lord Jesus Christ. In His name we pray. Amen.

Last time we took a turn that you may not have expected. I acknowledged that some other people cast some doubt on whether you can actually get to know what the author intended to say in Holy Scripture. We talked about author, text, and reader. I said that contemporary teaching about literary theory especially has drastically affected New Testament studies. There has been meditation on the degree to which the reader can really get inside the mind of the author. Some people have pronounced what they call to be the intentional fallacy. I cannot get in your mind, let alone get in the mind of somebody 2000 years ago. I cannot know for sure that I understand what you intend to say or what Matthew intended to say in the first century. It is physically impossible to do it, therefore we should just acknowledge it and not try to understand the intention of the author. What we are really dealing with is a text and a reader. You have undoubtedly seen in your own church that when people approach the Scripture sometimes they come up with very different interpretations of what that text is trying to say. People have said that that is an inherent part of our subjectivity. We are subjects when we approach Scripture. We approach it subjectively as people who have presuppositions. When we come to Scripture, all we see in it is basically a mirror of ourselves reflecting back to us our own presuppositions. Although the reader

approaches the text, what really matters here is the reader because the reader is the only one who can really know, in his or her own mind, what is going on. That means that every reader who approaches the text has to recognize that the validity of the way he or she approaches it is self-referential. In other words, whatever I think the text means is what it means for me. That is a common understanding in our society increasingly. You see it all the time. You watch a movie and somebody says, "What I got out of the movie is this." And somebody else says, "I got this out of the movie." Few people say, "I am trying to figure out what the director is trying to convey to us by the movie." Viewers approach movies in a much more internally focused way. Readers approach texts that way as well. Instead of trying to figure out what Melville was trying to say in *Moby Dick*, often people approach it by trying to figure out what they are supposed to get out of it. That is not a bad question. Application is good, but is that all there is? That is the question we want to frame today.

I would like to break it down into four different questions. The first question is "What do we think of the idea of the intentional fallacy?" The author intends something, but we cannot get inside his or her head. Does that mean that we should therefore not talk about the author's intention? That is what the intentional fallacy alleges. Since it is impossible, do not even try. Do you think this intentional fallacy is accurate or not? Some of you may feel like it is a fairly drastic overstatement. If God is the author, then there is a variety of ramifications. One of these is that we are duty-bound to figure out what God wants to say. If you look at the historical context, you can get to know something more about the author. Matthew speaks to Jewish people, and Luke probably speaks to a more Roman audience. If you get a sense of their audience, it gives you a better sense of their purpose. Some have said it seems incredibly selfish to say that you do not care about what the author is saying anymore because it makes it all about you. If you put it into relational categories, you want to relate to the author. It is almost as if you were sitting across from your friend and you were having a conversation. He wants to talk about how much he enjoys mustard on his hotdogs, but I am talking about Kantian philosophy. There is something unfair to him about that. Even if we do not know fully, we can still know the author's intentions partially. That, in and of itself, is a valid goal. The author seeks to communicate. There are a lot of ramifications to this. It makes us a little bit more ethically obligated to not be so selfish and to try and understand what he wants to communicate. It also means that if I am an author, if I am trying to communicate, and if I have any capacity at all, I am going to be able to use words in a way that you can presumably comprehend. It is not like I am speaking gibberish, and it is up to you to understand. I am actually trying and making the attempt to reach out. Some find intentional fallacy to be dishonest and impractical because you seek to understand what the person is trying to convey anyway. There is a sense in which, even if you try as hard as you will, it is hard to miss some blatant points.

Let me give you a few of my thoughts on whether or not you can attempt to understand the intention of an author. Some of this will reiterate what we have already said, and some of it will add to it. It is true that we cannot get into somebody's head. There is some truth to this. I like the idea of it being a drastic overstatement. There is some truth to it, but it seems like we are pushing it too far. This is because authors reveal themselves in their writing. If I am a good communicator, I try to reveal what I am thinking in my writing. For one thing, this is the very basis of communication. The most basic assumption of communication is that a speaker can communicate to his audience. Why try if it is not possible? If it is not possible for a speaker to communicate something to an audience, then we should all give up and go home. You could get as much out of watching some random shows on television and having your own thoughts than being here. When I speak of a "speaker," that is a technical linguistic term. I am saying that in a text we have an attempt by a speaker to communicate to an audience. Even in a text, a speaker is trying to speak. There is real communication attempted there.

Between a speaker and a listener there exist areas of commonality that make communication possible. For example, many of my students speak English, and I speak English as well. Although words can have ranges of meanings, there are agreed ranges for each word. I cannot say “shoe” and suddenly speak of the top of the Empire State Building. It does not make any sense to you that “shoe” would have something to do with the top of a building. “Shoe” has a certain range of meanings. Society itself constrains what is permissible in terms of communication. People will and do disobey the rules sometimes. When they do so they quickly recognize that either they are challenging the status quo for the sake of challenging it, or they are being very unsuccessful in their communication. For people who want to succeed in their communication, they use the areas of commonality in society. They use the societal way that has construed the language in order to communicate their thoughts best through that area of commonality.

Another area of commonality is historical context. For example, I could say, “How about we go down to the bread company and pick up some coffee?” Unless you have not been in Saint Louis very long, you probably understand that. But if you were from Zimbabwe and I said, “Let us go down to the bread company,” you would probably think the bread company is some place where you make bread. But if you have been in the country or the city for a while, you understand that “the bread company” is the Saint Louis Bread Company. It is a place where you can get a decent cup of coffee. My students here at the seminary know what I mean when I say that. They know that because we are working in the same historical framework and context. That shows that communication is possible if we are working with some of the basic common presuppositions. It is also a bit of a warning to us. We are living 2000 years after the time of the New Testament, so to the degree that we do not properly understand that culture, we might miss some of the communication that is going on. We will return to that a number of lessons later because it will be a big theme. It makes communication possible.

The careful speaker works within these areas of commonality to produce sentences that can convey his or her thoughts to the listener. You really try when you communicate because you want to be understood. You self-reveal, and you make sure that you say things in a way that let people in on what you are thinking. The text is the record of the author’s attempt to write these sentences. In that respect the text becomes our point of contact with the author, who is revealing himself. The more that you know about a person, the more you can understand that person’s communication. That is one of the reasons why it is a lot easier to understand what Paul tries to do in Philippians than what Jude tries to do in the epistle of Jude. We have a whole lot of Paul, and we have one little short letter from Jude. That is reality. The more you know about somebody and the more they have self-revealed, the more you can get into his mind and try and think like he thinks. That is part of our task as interpreters.

You can see that intentional fallacy is indeed a drastic overstatement. In fact, it does not let us play fair with what the author is trying to do. For instance, let us assume you wrote an essay on 1 Peter for this course. If I come back and tell you it was an awful essay on oranges, you have every right to throttle me. You have tried to put into that paper something that I will understand about what 1 Peter is about. If I come to it and make it say what I want it to say, that is not fair to you. That comes back to the ethics of communication, the selfishness, and the relational aspect. The Christian in the evangelical church right down the road might open up Matthew 5 for a devotional time. It warms his or her heart in a certain way, but the person has never asked what Matthew was trying to do. The person is simply looking for what he or she can get out of it in his or her devotional time. The person has not played by good ethical rules. He or she has not been fair to the author. The same is true in the university today when they have completely dispelled the author in the process.

The next question regarding intentional fallacy is whether the text coheres. Let me give you a little background in terms of contemporary literary theory. There was a movement more than 50 years ago called structuralism. Structuralism sought to show that, especially in fables, meaning is not in the text itself but in the form of expression. For instance, there are certain archetypes within fairytales. You always have the evil stepmother. There are certain archetypes who show up. What the movement tried to say was that the meaning was not so much in the individual words as in the very form of the expression itself. As soon as I start into the fairytale and say, "Once upon a time..." and I bring in the evil stepmother, the meaning is not in the text itself. It is behind the text. That does not seem right to me. I want to say that there is a difference between "Hansel and Gretel" and "The Little Mermaid." They have different intents. But I do recognize some structural similarities. It seems to have been a pendulum that swung too far to one side. This is what often happens in the world. People want to react, and they go too far. The response to structuralism was post-structuralism, which ultimately issued into deconstruction. It sought to show that if you pay attention to text, instead of there being an overarching form that constrains the meaning, there are always some gaps in the text. There is stuff that is not fully explained. If read "Hansel and Gretel," you read about the stream of breadcrumbs going along, and Hansel and Gretel are able to follow the breadcrumbs back. You have questions about that, such as "Would the birds not have eaten it up the first time? Why did they eat it up the second time? Why were the squirrels not involved in the process?" You can play around with texts like that and show that there are gaps and things that do not make complete sense.

You have to make some connections. You can especially see this in movies. You go from one scene in a movie to another scene in the movie and there will have been passage of time. In real time it has just been a second. You move from one scene to another scene, and there is a gap there. The movie wants you to fill it in a certain way. For instance, you are in an office setting, and then the person is at home. You are supposed to fill in the setting by assuming that he drove home. There are ways you are expected to fill in the gaps. The same is true in any narrative. The post-structuralists and the deconstructionists like to show that society constrains you to fill in those gaps in a certain way. But society could be wrong. There are gaps in the text, and you could fill them in in different ways. So they want you to play with it a little bit. Just what happened on the way home? You could change the meaning of the text by assuming that instead of driving home he stops in a liquor store on the way and gets a little drunk. The text does not imply that, but let us throw it in and see what happens. Play with it. When you start playing with texts like that and filling in gaps in random ways, the texts unravel. Instead of doing what they seem to have been trying to do you, can make it all disintegrate. In those movements, people play with texts like that. I am putting it in crude terms, but this is what Jacques Derrida was trying to do in France. This has impacted a major American university.

Let me give you an example of this. It was one of my very first glimpses into professional scholarship. I was studying in seminary in Chicago and planning on going on for Ph.D. studies. Just down the street in Chicago was going to be the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature. The Society of Biblical Literature is a major professional society. I belong to it; most teachers of the Bible belong to it. It is very broad in terms of different theological viewpoints and different backgrounds of the people who are involved. It can be exciting in that way, but it can also be quite shocking at times. As a little naive seminary student, and since the annual meeting happened to be in Chicago that year, my friend Dave and I said we were going to go to the annual meeting. We were going to go off and become Ph.D. students eventually anyway, so we wanted to go. It was a great time. We got to see a lot of things. But it was also eye opening at times, too. For instance, we went to the presidential address. Every year there is a presidential address, and usually about 2000 people show up to it. The president changes every year. The year in question, the president for that year, was Phyllis Tribble. She is a very famous scholar who especially works with Old Testament texts. She is very interested in hermeneutics, the study of

interpretation. She is also very interested in literary theory and what is new. She gave what would be called a poststructuralist or a deconstructionist reading of the Elijah and Jezebel narratives. You know the story. Elijah is the prophet, and Jezebel is the horrible queen who is suppressing God's people. She is especially trying to do away with the worship of Yahweh. Instead, she thinks everybody should worship Baal. Elijah is one of the few people to stand up, in fact, he feels alone. At one point God has to encourage him that God still has a lot of people around. Elijah is a great prophet who stands up to Jezebel. Elijah prays, and there is no rain. Then he prays again, and there is rain. The rain comes down, whereas the prophets of Baal were not able to do that. Elijah is able to pray to his God, and the rain comes.

Tribble did a deconstructionist reading of this. There are gaps in the text, things that the text does not talk about. She would acknowledge, for instance, that the text tries to get you to side with Elijah. But what if we wanted to side with Jezebel? We start saying to ourselves, are there not gaps in the text? What does Elijah do right after the rain starts coming down and the prophets of Baal are shown to be false prophets? He kills them; there is a mass slaughtering of priests. They are human beings. She might ask, "Is that the right thing to do?" What is it that we have against Jezebel? She is killing the prophets of Yahweh. But Elijah just did the opposite. Elijah was serving his God, Yahweh. Jezebel was serving her god, Baal. You can ask what is going on in the text there. Clearly there is a bias in the text toward Yahweh. But Tribble said there is also a bias toward the guy—Elijah. Jezebel is a lady. At the time Tribble was speaking, in twenty-first-century America, we recognize that there was a patriarchal nature to literature throughout the ages. She said part of what was really going on is we had a patriarchal author siding with a guy and his deity, and in the process Jezebel and her deity got marginalized. That was the presidential address in front of 2000 people, after which there was a standing ovation. Does that shock you? That is what is going on in universities today.

The question is this: does the text cohere? We are not talking about the author now; we are talking about the text. Are there gaps in the text that you can fill in in different ways to understand the text differently that would actually undermine the text? Some say it is not legal to change the story like she did. She is hijacking the story. A lot of the post-structuralism and deconstructionist readings come from Marxists, very strong feminists, or from gay and lesbian readings right now. They are trying to say that we have to hijack these narratives because they have been suppressing us for years. So we have to hijack them. Tribble would admit to that. But we would wonder if that is fair or not. There are gaps in the story, but do we need to fill them in in a certain way or not? It has to do with our sin nature as well.

I said that there was a standing ovation for Dr. Tribble. My friend and I were such eager young students that we had gotten seats toward the very front. Throughout her speech David and I did not communicate with each other; we just stared in disbelief. What do you do at the end when everybody else was standing up? What was going through my head was that I could see academically how this was fun and games. I could see what she was trying to do academically. But it also went through my mind that this was heresy. She just equated Baal with Yahweh; she has equated the God of the universe with a demonic, petty non-deity. That is horrible; sin nature is there. David and I, when it came time for applause, both reached down to our bags at our feet and started fiddling with them! It was not the place to walk out, but at the same time we could not applaud that.

Going back to the question, the text does cohere within its own historical context, within the relationship between the author and the audience. The audience would know that Jezebel was widely understood as a very evil woman. They did not expect her to be otherwise. They did not expect her to be good, and they did not expect Elijah to be the bad guy. There is a sense in which the deconstructionist is right. The way we fill in the gaps is via social convention. The issue is that they do not like those social conventions.

The way they want to critique them is by throwing them out. If you acknowledge that there are social conventions that allow us to fill in the gaps, historical context comes up again. The relationship between the author and his or her audience allows you to fill in those gaps. There might be another viewpoint; Jezebel probably did view it differently than Elijah did. The question has to do with whether or not you agree with the Bible representing that Yahweh really is God. Yahweh is God; Baal is not. Therefore, this is the right viewpoint. There is a more fundamental spiritual issue going on. Our disposition to the text is going to affect how we receive it.

There is still a basic issue of fairness regarding the text. If we came across another document that was written from Jezebel's point of view it might hammer home how great Jezebel was and how awful Elijah was. We might very much disagree with that, but if we are going to be fair to that document, we do not make the document itself say something other than it does. That is what the deconstructionist is trying to do. The deconstructionist is saying that the whole thing can unravel; the document itself can unravel. On a purely academic basis, we could hypothetically consider Jezebel's position. But first let us understand the way this was written and what this is trying to say. You can disagree with it, but you do not disagree with it by making it say something other than what it says. You understand what it says first and then disagree with it later. That is where there might be some serious problems. Some have said that the Bible is in a different category than other works. It is wrong to try to subvert it and completely go the other direction. I want to go further than that, though. I think it is unfair to go to the director of a movie and tell him or her that what you got out of it was something completely different from what he or she intended. It is unfair to Shakespeare to say that what he was really trying to say in *Romeo and Juliet* is that we should fight with one another. We need to have good battles, and it is good when people die and commit suicide. That is unfair to Shakespeare. That might be your position, but it is unfair to Shakespeare to do that to him. In the same way it is not fair to the Bible to make it say something other than what it says.

Let me move on and mention a few things regarding whether or not the text coheres. If one wishes to participate in a communicative act, that is, they want to hear what is being said, then you need to give the speaker the benefit of the doubt. This is proper, and it is what you do in an act of communication. We give the speaker the benefit of the doubt in several ways. We assume that the speaker is trying to communicate in a coherent fashion. We do not immediately go in and think that this person is just going to babble. We assume a coherency to what the person is trying to communicate. We have to assume rightly that the text coheres.

Next, we accept the social conventions within which the speaker is communicating, even if we do not agree with him or her. If we really want to understand what the author is trying to communicate, we have to work within the social conventions in which that author is working. That is how you understand something.

Another way that we give the author the benefit of the doubt is we think the best of him or her and assume, unless we have significant evidence to the contrary, that he or she is attempting to make rational sense. We assume rationality on the point of the other person. If we recognize that those are the assumptions we should have in coming to a communicative act, it allows the text to cohere. If we disagree with that then the text unravels. But that is an ethical problem with us, not with the author. Next, while we may disagree with the philosophy of the text, it is still possible to understand the text on its own terms. Only after understanding it do we argue against it. I did try to adequately represent what Phyllis Tribble was trying to do even though I radically disagree with it. She has a point of view, and we need to understand that point of view before we critique it. I did not try to make her point of view into babble itself. I tried to understand it first and then critique it. The deconstructionists are often not

actually saying anything new when they deconstruct the text. Phyllis Tribble was not the first person to ask if there was a different perspective on this story. What the deconstructionists are doing that is new is incorporating their disagreement into their reading of the text itself. In other words, instead of interpreting it first and then disagreeing, they undermine the whole interpretation of the text itself. They make it say something other than what it intended to say. I view this as not fair. Thus it is not the text's inability to communicate that is really being critiqued. The assumption of the text itself is being derided.

Contrary to many popular arguments, texts do not exist as entities by themselves. One of the reasons the deconstructionists can do this is because they have already written off the author. We just tried to reestablish that the author has something to say here. But if you take the author out of the picture then all you have is a text and a reader. That allows the text to be messed with a little bit more. But if you say an author is involved there is a real line, and the text comes from an author. Suddenly you are back to an ethical system in which you need to be fair to the author before you critique the text. The very fact that texts are authored means that they have meaning that we can seek to understand. In a postmodern context you can get movies that are almost like random images. They might have so many different themes that compete with one another that it is hard to know what the one theme is or what the director is trying to convey. Even in that context you should consider the director's intention. In a very non-postmodern sense, yet affirming the diversity of postmodernism, you should do this. In trying to understand what a director is doing with a picture that is so random, I understand him or her to be trying to create a random product. He or she is trying to create something that challenges our understanding by making it all random. Ironically, I am coming back to them and saying, "I want to understand you. I want to assume that you are able to communicate even though you are communicating randomly. The very randomness of your communication can be understood as your intent." I am approaching them with the same hermeneutic. I feel like that is fair to them even though they are trying to play games with the whole system.

The deconstructionists see their view as complete, pure subjectivity. They argue that the subject constrains the interpretation of the text. Therefore, when I look at that movie, it is all on my shoulders. I can make it mean whatever I want because that is my privilege as the subject, but that goes a step further than subjectivity. I step outside of that and say it is not fair. There is still an object out there. If we are going to be fair to that object, we need to let that critique our understanding of it. That is only fair in any act of communication.

The third question regarding intentional fallacy is whether we should privilege the reader. Even if we see the text is a coherent product of an author, we still want to be able to get something from the text. They are going to do that by reading the text and seeing what hits them. They will see what warms their heart or what makes them angry. They are interested in their response to the text. Should we not just privilege the reader? Some feel like it is lazy and selfish to do that. There can be some people who are very sharp and intelligent and are not being lazy in the process but often it is more of a default response. Some say this approach is not honest because you are not seeking to learn or be challenged. You are letting yourself challenge yourself instead of letting somebody else challenge you. The purpose of Scripture is to reprove, correct, and instruct. If you are not letting Scripture do that, you are not engaging the purpose of Scripture. I have been trying to do this in a very academic way, talking about literature broadly, but if we really see the Bible as something that comes from God, then we are undermining God in the process. We are saying it is all right to live in my own private world. I do not have to let God tread in a very uncomfortable way in my life. He is the Almighty God of the universe, though, so we need to let Him do that.

Regarding that third question, some say privileging the reader allows them to sit above the text rather than sit under the text. That is a pride issue. It also wreaks havoc in the church. That is a different point. Practically it allows individuals to believe whatever they want to believe. Suddenly the whole church disintegrates. Some find this unsettling because it gives no room for absolute truth. But we need to ask another question. Postmodernism has a point for us, and we do not want to be complete modernists. There can still be application after we understand the intended meaning of the text. It is not bad to read Scripture and have it impact your life. But you need to understand it and its intent first before you apply it. One of the things that happens when the reader just gets out of it what he wants is it short-circuits Scripture. It is easier, faster, and quicker to just go to the text, read it in my devotional life, and come out warmed and happy. Instead we should sit down and do the hard work of understanding what Jesus meant by the Beatitudes. We should look for what Jesus intended to say and how that fits into the context of what Matthew is trying to convey about what Jesus said. Then we can apply it to our lives. When we do that it can be unsettling. For instance, it disconcerts me that one of the things He most blesses are those who are persecuted. I do not want to be persecuted. When you see that that is in the text, you make an application that is slightly different than if you just walked away feeling you were blessed.

The last question I want to discuss is whether it is possible for a reader to objectively understand a text. My short answer is that it is not possible, but I want to qualify that. In other words, I cannot be absolutely confident that I have completely, fully, and objectively understood in such a way that I have in my mind the exact idea of what the author and God intended in Scripture in every instance. We need to recognize that I am still approaching the text as a subject. I have presuppositions and a pre-understanding that gets in the way. I have to acknowledge that. An example of that is the number of denominations that we have today. If we all objectively understood the text, were willing to ascend to it, bow our knee to it, and follow it, there would be no need for so many denominations that disagree with each other. To the extent that people have misconstrued the text over time, we have different denominations. We should not think that our denomination has everything right. That would be unwise. Nor should we think that individually we have everything right. We approach the text as a subject. But the text is still there, and it critiques my subjectivity.

I have a certain pre-understanding when I approach a text. Some people say the whole thing is circular. This is known as the hermeneutical circle. I have a pre-concept of what the text means, so when I read Romans I already think it is about justification by faith. I come back, and it confirms what I thought before. I want you to think about whether or not this is a vicious circle. Do we confirm our own pre-understanding when we approach a text? Not necessarily—we have seen ourselves change when we read Scripture. Part of this observation comes from a phenomenological awareness that people seem to read the Bible like they want it to be read. So there has to be some truth to the hermeneutical circle. At the same time, we have seen change in our viewpoint. So it cannot be the whole truth. Part of this has to do with our disposition. We can seek truth in the text. Are we willing to be critiqued by the text? If we are, the text is out there and remains an object. It would be horrible to move around the words on the page. There is an object there that critiques us. The more we have seen that happen, the more we can practice letting the text change us.

We also have the benefit of earlier saints who have read the text, and that can help critique us. I have read a lot of the early church fathers. They are people who were closer to the time period and often had great insights into the text. They also made great mistakes exegetically. I look at Justin Martyr and others, and I know I need to listen to them. But they also made a lot of mistakes. We have the privilege of over 2000 years of interpretation, of seeing a lot of different attempts at interpretation, some of whom can argue their case better than others. When I look at church tradition I am not just thinking early church; I am thinking up until five minutes ago. If we look at the whole of the church's exegesis of the

text we are in a community of learners. That forces us to consider other possible meanings of the text. The Holy Spirit is also involved in the process of interpretation. As we look down through all of these things, we recognize that there is something special in the interpretation of Scripture. God has a vested interest in how we come out in this. His Holy Spirit illumines our understanding of Scripture. At the same time we cannot presume on that. The church throughout the ages has claimed to be the Holy Spirit, and yet they have disagreed with one another. We need to recognize and humbly acknowledge that our pre-understanding can be wrong. We ask for the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and that gives us extra confidence as we approach the text. It is an object that can critique our pre-understanding. We should read Scripture in a community of readers with the rest of the church, see other viewpoints in the church, and allow those to also critique our pre-understanding. As we have a disposition of seeking the truth of Scripture, it, along with the humility that is involved in that, allows us to come to the text and have some hope of critiquing our pre-understanding. As I will mention next time, I would prefer to see it as a spiral instead of a circle. Yes, we approach the text with our pre-understanding. But in humility, seeking the truth and allowing the text to critique us, we spiral into a better and more appropriate understanding of the text.