Introduction and Definition of Hermeneutics

Welcome to this course on biblical hermeneutics. This is a course based on the one taught at Gordon College, and what I hope to do during this time is introduce you to a number of things. As we’ll see, “hermeneutics” can be a term that’s very misunderstood and used very broadly and often used to cover a number of things. So what I want to do is first of all we’ll look at the issue of what hermeneutics is in this lecture session. What do we mean by “hermeneutics.” How does it relate to other terms, such as interpretation, and exegesis, other terms that you have hopefully heard about? We’ll also talk a little bit about the different methods of interpretation, different methods of criticism, and how those can be useful in interpretation and understanding the biblical text. We’ll talk a little bit about the history of interpretation and the history of hermeneutics. It is important to understand that we never just sit down and start to interpret, but we stand at the end of a long line of others who have wrestled with and thought about the biblical text, and who have attempted to understand it. So it’s important to understand where we stand in relationship to others who have gone before us and have interpreted the text. One of the things that I would like you to do as well in this course is learn the names of key figures who are associated with certain hermeneutical movements. So that is the cluster of ideas, hopefully, we can cover in this time.

I want to begin by asking the question: What is hermeneutics and why is it necessary? Why do we need to sit through a series of lectures to learn how to read and interpret the Bible? Why don’t we just sit down and read it? And I’ve, as you have perhaps, heard of countless stories of persons that have said, “I don’t need all of this, all I do is just sit down and read the Bible.” But we’re going to see even that kind of approach reveals a number of assumptions about how we understand and read the biblical text. So I want to start today by asking: What is hermeneutics and why do we need it? Why is it necessary?
First of all, what is hermeneutics? This is, as I’ve already said, a term that is frequently understood in a variety of ways. In fact, the more you read about it, the more you find that it can mean a number of things depending on who you’re talking to or who you’re reading. For some, hermeneutics means “the application of the correct methods of interpretation to the biblical text.” This assumes that by applying the right method or the correct technique to the biblical text, one then can determine the correct meaning of it. For some, interpretation is the actual study itself of the biblical text, not just the understanding of the correct methods, but the actual study of the text itself. But usually, the way hermeneutics is used today – although, again, technically this lecture series won’t be restricted just to talking about what some think is hermeneutics, that is, the philosophy of how we understand and what we do when we try to understand the meaning of something, but we will talk about different methods, and we’ll range a lot more broadly to consider different approaches and different methods of interpretation and to consider how those can be fruitful in interpreting the biblical text – but hermeneutics has usually come to be understood more broadly in biblical studies to mean not just the application of sound principals and techniques of the biblical text, but hermeneutics actually has come to, first of all, be used more broadly than just understanding the Bible, to the broader human disciplines of how we understand at all, whether it is in the sciences or literature or history or in the other disciplines. How is it that we understand? What are we doing when we are trying to understand something else, or some other facet of communication? So the study of hermeneutics has broadened out far beyond biblical studies, as we’ll see.

Yet, what is being done with hermeneutics even outside of biblical studies affects the way that we approach and interpret the Bible as well. But, hermeneutics, again, is more than just the proper application of techniques and the correct methods of understanding the Bible. Hermeneutics has come to ask the question: “What does it mean to understand something? How do we understand?” Again, for our purposes we are talking about understanding a biblical text, the New or Old Testament text. But how do we understand—what do we do when we attempt to understand a biblical text? That will
be one of the focuses of this series of lectures: to look at issues related to, “What are we doing when we try to read and understand the biblical text? What are we doing when we interpret? How do we come to understanding?”

The word “hermeneutics,” as most textbooks will tell you, is a term that stems from a Greek word that was used of the god Hermes. It comes from the Greek word hermeneuō (ἕρμηνεύω),” which means “to translate, to understand, to explain, to interpret.” The term was used of the Greek god Hermes, and when someone would want to understand something, or someone would go to consult Hermes to receive a message from the gods, Hermes kind of acted as an interpreter or a go-between and would communicate and interpret the message from the gods to the person who is inquiring about the information. So, Hermes acted as a mediator, a go-between between the message of the gods and the human being. And so “hermeneutics” can in sense be seen as a “go-between.” It’s a mediator between the text that we’re trying to understand, and meaning of the interpreter. Human understanding then, bridges the gap between the text and us so that we can make sense of things, and again, for our purposes, so that we can make sense of the biblical text. So, basically, hermeneutics has to do with: “How do we understand something? What do we do when we attempt to understand something?”

But how does this understanding of hermeneutics relate to other disciplines, such as what we call “interpretation,”? A lot of people will use hermeneutics and interpretation almost identically. How does it relate to exegesis? “Exegesis” is a term that will usually be associated with what you do if you take a biblical language course, such as Greek or Hebrew exegesis. How does it relate to those? How does it differ from exegesis? Exegesis is usually understood more as the specific application of sound principals and techniques to draw out the meaning of the text in its original context and in its original meaning. So exegesis is probing a text from its various angles. Texts have literary aspects to them. They also have historical dimensions. Biblical texts have a theological dimension. They have a cultural dimension and a linguistic dimension as well. So that, exegesis is probing the text from various angles, attempting to draw out the meaning as the author probably originally intended, in its historical context. But again, hermeneutics
is much broader than that. It gets at the issue of, not just the application of principals, but how do we understand? What does it mean to understand? What does it mean to interpret a text? What do we do when we understand and apply a text?

Interpretation, then, is also slightly different than hermeneutics in that interpretation refers then to the actual practice of understanding a text. One might consider hermeneutics more as theorizing about how we understand and what we do when we understand a text. Interpretation could be seen more as the actual understanding, the actual interpretation of the text, or the actual application of methods to understand a text.

**Three Approaches To Hermeneutics**

So, both hermeneutics and interpretation then raise the questions of: How do we understand a text? What do we do when we understand a text? And, What are the correct methods and techniques that are utilized to understand a text? That raises the question—when we think about hermeneutics and interpretation, we are asking the question of: What role does three different features of communication play? That is, there is the author that produces the text, and there is also the text itself, the product that the authors produce that communicates. Then there is the reader that tries to understand and make sense of the text. So interpretation asks the question about the author, the text, and the reader. Particularly, which one – or perhaps all three – but which one of those plays the primary role when it comes to understanding of the text? Where does meaning lie? What should be our focus when we try to understand a biblical text? Are we asking the question of the author? Are we focusing on the author’s intention? This would be one set of approaches to hermeneutics that would be characterized as the “author’s intention,” an approach known as “authorial intent.” So we will focus on going behind the text. Historically, people have wondered: What was the author intending? What did the author intend to communicate by producing this text? So, one feature of hermeneutics is to focus on the author and the author’s intention communicating as the primary locus of meaning.

The second feature of hermeneutics, or second place that persons often focus on when it comes to hermeneutics, then, is the text. Or some have called that focusing within
the text. So the author would be going behind the text, to ask questions about the author’s intention, what the author is trying to do? But a text-centered hermeneutic would focus on the text itself, the finished product, the empirical evidence that we have in the form of the written text as the primary locus of meaning and interpretation. So often the text—according to this approach, is seen to have a life of its own. So some would even say, irrespective of who the author was and what he intended to communicate, the text now has a life of its own, and so the text is the primary object of our interpretation. So we try to understand the Old or New Testament passage itself and the way the text has been put together.

The third place where interpretation or meaning is thought to lie would be in the reader. That is, readers make sense of text, and some would suggest therefore without a reader to make sense of it and read it, especially if we don’t have access to the author, especially biblical authors who are long gone, it is ultimately the reader who must make sense of the text. So we come from different cultures, we come from different backgrounds, we come from different perspectives, we come from different theological bents, and this will all affect the way that we read the text. So some would say the primary meaning resides in the reader and his or her ability to make sense of a biblical text.

As we’ll see as we begin to move through, especially the first part or first half of this series of lectures on hermeneutics, we’ll focus on those three aspects and notice how many of the methods revolve around those three aspects: methods of interpretation, and hermeneutical philosophies that focus on the author: others that focus on the text; and more recently those that focus primarily on the reader. We’ll see even historically that’s kind of the order in which hermeneutics and interpretation has developed. But we will ask the question then: When we think about hermeneutics and interpretation, what is the relationship between these three? Does one of them get more importance and prominence than others? Or are they all three equally valid? So again, we’re going to look at the theories of interpretation. We’ll look at the history of interpretation and how that affects the way we look at the biblical text. We’ll look at different methods of interpretation,
different methods of criticism, and how those can help us also interact with the biblical text.

**Necessity of Hermeneutics**

Why is hermeneutics necessary? Again, we’ve all heard stories of someone that says, “Well, I don’t need hermeneutics; all I need to do is sit down and read the text. Why not just sit down and read the Bible for itself?” But, as we’re going to see, that approach actually reveals an assumption about hermeneutics and understanding as far as how we read a text, and what it means to interpret biblical texts. But why is hermeneutics necessary? Hermeneutics functions primarily – and again, when I talk about hermeneutics, often I’m talking about both hermeneutics in its philosophical sense about how we understand, but also hermeneutics in terms of how some understand it as interpretation and the correct techniques and methods of interpreting biblical texts. But why is hermeneutics necessary? Hermeneutics provides a bridge between a text produced at a time and during a time, in a culture, in a language, in a history, in a religious and philosophical and political environment that is very very different than our own, at least most of us. It is very very different than our own. So that at times, we are prone to misunderstand, if we’re not aware of the difference between our own perspective and that of the ancient text that we’re trying to understand. However, at the same time, I am convinced that there are commonalities that are necessary for understanding. If there were no commonalities at all, we simply could not understand the biblical text. So there’s not such a wide gap or distance that it’s hopeless to ever think that we can overcome it. But hermeneutics is necessary because, again, we are reading a series of documents produced at a time, in an environment, a culture, a situation that is very very different in some respects and distinct from our own. Hermeneutics helps us to bridge that gap so that we can arrive at an understanding of the biblical text.

There are a number of gaps that hermeneutic helps to bridge, because there are a number of ways that the biblical text is distant from us. For example, there is a temporal distance. In interpreting the Bible, we are dealing with texts that we are produced, nearly two thousand years and earlier than our own existence. So, it’s imperative then that we
are able to recognize that distance and to be able to bridge that gap as well. I like to illustrate that with a story. I remember one time when I lived in Montana, and I was going to college and trying to do any summer jobs I could to help earn tuition dollars. I remember I helped one rancher tear down a log cabin. The log cabin had been built in the early nineteen hundreds – nineteen twenties or thirties or something like that – and it had been outdated. But some of the logs were still in very good shape, so the rancher hoped to dismantle the cabin carefully and save most of the logs to build his own house, because a lot of them were still in very good shape, and that would obviously save him quite a bit of money. So he called me up and asked if I would help him take this cabin apart and help him salvage these logs. So I met him and we began our work on this cabin, and I noticed as we began to remove the logs that in-between the logs were some newspapers, which were often used to stuff the holes to keep out the cold Montana winter winds. I started looking at these newspapers and reading – I was drawn to the political cartoons – and I began to look at them and realized I had no idea what I was reading, and could not make any sense of them. A lot of it was simply because I was reading literature from a very different time period. Although it was only seventy-five or eighty years ago from the time I was reading it, I still had trouble understanding, and some of it was a complete mystery to me, simply because it was produced at a time period of which I was not aware of what was going on then. How much more is this true with texts produced over two millennia ago and earlier? So the study of hermeneutics and interpretation helps us to bridge this temporal distance, especially when the authors and the readers are not here to consult. So there’s a temporal distance that stands between us, as the interpreters, and the biblical text. Hermeneutics is a way to bridge that gap.

**Varying Views**

There’s a second distance, and some of these are related; these are not distinct categories; there’s probably a little bit of overlap between them. But another difference between us as interpreters and the biblical text is a cultural difference. In the biblical world—whether the ancient near-eastern world or the Greco-Roman world of the New Testament reveals a world that has a very different culture and very different cultural
values often than the world we live in. Sometimes I find that interpreters and readers from third world countries have an easier time reading of biblical texts because they come from a culture that is much closer to the biblical text and the biblical culture than the North American, individualistic, technologically advanced culture that I live in. But still, there are often cultural values and differences that at times have to be overcome in trying to understand the biblical text, at least as the author attempted to communicate. Again, we live in a very individualistic and technological age, at least in North America, where upward mobility and the fact that I get a pay check every two weeks sometimes functions to distance me from the culture that produced the biblical text.

To give you a couple of examples—some of these we may return to later on in the class and actually deal with them, others, I just mention to demonstrate the struggle in trying to understand the text. The other disclaimer I have to make is that I am a New Testament professor by vocation and interest, so my examples will be weighted towards the New Testament, but I will try to bring in as many Old Testament examples as I can and which I am comfortable with to also demonstrate the different principals that we’ll be working on. Here is a New Testament example: in 1 Corinthians 11, Paul addresses the issue of men and women and their relationship together within the context of the church as it gathers for worship. His instruction is primarily to women and how they are able to prophesy, and he begins to discuss the fact that he permits them to prophecy, as long as their head is properly covered. My purpose at this point is not to deal with that text at length or to solve the problem, but just to demonstrate that – what is the significance of that head covering in that text? Does it have any resemblance to head coverings that we are familiar with today, whether it’s in a Muslim culture or some other expression? Is Paul referring to head covering or to hair, is another debate in that text. What does it mean? What kind of background or cultural information is Paul drawing on that we need to be aware of if we’re giving to understand Paul’s instructions in 1 Corinthians chapter 11. So, 1 Corinthians 11, I think, is one example of, where we will be in danger of misunderstanding that text, at least as Paul was attempting to communicate, without some
kind of a knowledge of the cultural background that informed Paul’s instructions relating to head coverings.

Another example: Revelation chapter 13. In Revelation chapter 13 John portrays the Roman Empire of his day as a hideous beast, and one of the questions is, Why is John so – not only in chapter 13, but throughout the book of Revelation – rather negative towards the government? Why is John’s portrayal of the Roman Empire in the book of Revelation rather bleak and dark, to the effect that he portrays it as this beast that is meant to do harm? Well, again, without solving that right now, part of the answer is certainly that, in the first century in the Roman Empire, you simply could not disentangle issues of politics and religion. And so, for someone to be involved in and belong to and live out life and even make a living in the context of the Roman Empire brought a number of challenges because often that it would engage them in compromising, idolatrous religious practices. At least, a lot of times in our modern-day, governments and religion are kept separate. But in the first century, most of what John is aiming his criticism at could not be understood unless we understand in the first century, religion and politics and economy were closely intertwined. And certainly, part of John’s critique of the Roman government has to do with the idolatrous religious practices that one would engage in if you also participated in Rome politically and economically.

Luke chapter 11, what is the significance of Luke chapter 11, the parable of the so-called good Samaritan? What is the significance that the Samaritan is the hero of the story? Again, we will misunderstand this parable, especially in our modern-day North American context, where the Samaritan has been domesticated. We have things like “Good Samaritan Food Pantries” and “Good Samaritan Hospitals,” etc. etc. We have domesticated the Samaritan. But as we’ll see, a few times throughout these lectures, that’s not how they would have looked at a Samaritan in the first century, especially a first century Jew. So without understanding something of the culture, and how the Samaritans were viewed, one is likely to miss the force of the parable of the Good Samaritan.
What about Luke 15 and the well-known parable of the prodigal son? Once again, I have to confess for years and years, I read that parable – and perhaps some of this is because I grew up, or spent several years, in Montana surrounded by ranches, and I pictured the farm, or this father, living on a ranch out in the boondocks somewhere separated from society. In Montana, sometimes you can drive for five miles and still not be to the end of your driveway, let alone within sight of another house. So I envisioned this father off somewhere on a ranch out in the middle of nowhere. But what if he is living in a typical Middle Eastern village, and everyone knew what was going on, and everyone was observing what was happening? What then was the significance of the father out running out to greet and hug a son who had treated him the way he did? No one in the town would have missed what went on. Yet, if we don’t understand the culture, and if we’re – as I did – too quick to read our own culture into what’s going on, again, we may misunderstand the parable, or at the very least, we may miss something important. But again, with the parable of the prodigal son, what’s the significance of the father running out and greeting the son and hugging him before the watching eyes of the community?

The book of Ruth, interestingly towards the end of the book of Ruth, you have this very interesting reference to the men sitting at the gate. Are they being lazy? You know, we sometimes picture the women probably working and cooking and doing all kinds of things, and here’s the men sitting around at the gate and just being lazy. The text takes on a different color when you recognize that this is where the leaders met to decide important business for the town. So these men are not being lazy and just sitting there shooting the breeze and talking. They're most likely, conducting business.

**Cultural Differences**

Or how might our individualistic culture affect the way we read certain biblical texts? That might be better understood as addressing a culture that was more attune to community and a culture where the persons understood the communal relationship that they belong to, as more important than who you were as an individual was the group that
you belonged to? So there’s a cultural distance between us and the biblical text that could cause us to misunderstand the text.

**Historical Separation**

There’s also a historical distance. Again, this is related to the previous two. The biblical texts record and assume events that are far removed from us. And furthermore, often the biblical texts are not interested in giving us a detailed, blow-for-blow account of everything that happened. For those of us that were not there to witness the events, at times we struggle to understand what was the event that was taking place, and what was the nature of the event. What historical circumstances lead up to what the author is talking about and discussing? Again, for example, in John chapter 4 – and we have already mentioned Luke chapter 11, the parable of the Good Samaritan – but John chapter 4, where Jesus goes to the woman at the well who is a Samaritan. Once again, we will misunderstand these texts if we fail to understand the long history of antagonism between the Jewish people and the Samaritans, and how this affected the way the Jews viewed this certain group. When that is taken into consideration the fact that the Samaritan is a hero of a parable, and the fact that Jesus would go visit one is rather startling, and would be rather shocking to the first readers.

Without understanding the events surrounding the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in 70 AD, one will have a difficulty understanding texts like Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21 that record where Jesus, at least partially addresses the situation surrounding the destruction of Jerusalem. Old Testament narratives are full of all kinds of references to historical events, whether references to accounts of warfare, or the political situation in Israel, but the point is, often there is a historical distance that separates us from the biblical text, and hermeneutics helps us to bridge that gap.

**Language Barrier**

Another distance is a linguistic distance. The Old and New Testaments are written in at least two languages. The Old Testament also contains parts of a couple of texts in a third language: Aramaic. But the Old Testament and New Testament are written in two languages that are very different than our own. And so, once again, hermeneutics and
principles of interpretation help us to bridge that gap, and help us to overcome that distance. So, for example, in the Old and New Testament, in contrast to how it seems to be used today – and we’ll return to this issue later under the topic of translation – often the Hebrew and Greek words that we often in English translate “man” or “male, man or brother” – they're masculine terms – in the Old and New Testament, they seem to be terms that could be used of groups of both males and females. As I understand it, that’s becoming less and less prominent, especially in the English language, and a number of other language as well. And so, the Old and New Testament texts may use language in a very different way – especially gender type of language – than were used to in some of our languages. Words seldom mean the same thing, even words that stem from a similar root, or words that are derivative from another language, or words that are derivative from an earlier language. Word meanings almost never completely overlap. So that we cannot, even though we have a rough equivalent, we cannot assume that the meaning of a word in one language is going to approximate the meaning of the Hebrew or Greek word. I still remember, even in one of my seminary classes, a student struggling with the fact that Paul would use the word “hope” (obviously he didn’t use the English word “hope”) but we translate the Greek word emiah that Paul used, with the English word “hope.” And this student struggled that Paul would see Christianity and Jesus’ return as merely “a hope.” Part of the problem was that he was trying to understand Paul’s use of the word by our English word “hope,” and struggled for quite some time due to a failure to understand that words very seldom, if ever, overlap between languages.

Another interesting one that I’m always interested in is, when it comes to interpreting Greek tenses. For example, unlike English, that is a primarily temporal in orientation – we have past, present, and future – Greek verb tenses didn’t seem to primarily indicate time that was indicated by other means. So, when someone is dealing with a Greek text, we have to be careful when we are interpreting the Greek tenses, or even Hebrew tenses, that we are not reading, for example, our English verb system or tense system back into the Greek or Hebrew one. So those are just some examples of how there’s a linguistic difference between the language that the Old and New Testament was
written in, and the language that we now try to understand it in, modern-day 21st century English.

**Geographically Separated**

There is a fifth difference or fifth distance, and that is a geographical difference. So there’s a temporal distance: the biblical texts were written in a very different time, at least around two-thousand millennia and earlier from our own time. That also creates a cultural difference: the biblical text attests to a culture with cultural values very different from our own. There’s a historical difference: the biblical text refers to events and assumes events that once again we are separated from. There’s also a linguistic difference: the biblical texts are written in languages that may or may not correspond to the languages that we speak today. The next difference then is a geographical difference. There are a number of interesting geographical features that again, are referred to or are assumed in the biblical text that may not be familiar to modern readers, but that might influence the way we understand the biblical text, and again, hermeneutics and interpretation help us to sort of bridge that gap.

For example, and interesting one from the Old Testament is when Jonah flees. In the book of Jonah, God calls him to go to the Assyrians and to preach the gospel, and Jonah refuses and flees to Tarshish. If you look at a map you’ll find Jonah didn’t just kind of go to the town next-door. Jonah went about as far as you could get in the opposite direction. But unless one is familiar with the geography of the land, one fails to see the extreme that Jonah would go to not to go preach to this wicked, horrible nation that God was calling him to go to.

Another very intriguing example comes from the book of Revelation, and one of the letters in the first couple of chapters. Revelation chapter 3, and a letter to the church in Laodicea, and starting in verse 15, I’ll read verses 15 and 16 of chapter 3. John says, actually, John is quoting the words of Jesus, communicating the words of Jesus to the church of Laodicea, one of the seven churches in Asia minor, modern-day Turkey, that John was addressing his revelation, his apocalypse to. But in verses 15 and 16, Jesus says to the church through John, “I know your deeds, that you are neither hot nor cold. I wish
you were either one or the other. So because you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, I am about to spit you out of my mouth.” Now, usually when we interpret this text, and the way I was taught to read it, was from my own perspective. That is, usually hot and cold were seen as sort of binary opposites—hot was a good thing, and cold was something bad. To be hot meant to be, in religious jargon which I grew up in, to be hot meant to be on fire for Christ, and to be cold means to be turned off, to completely be antagonistic towards Christ, to refuse to obey, to refuse to follow, to want nothing to do with Christ. Then lukewarm was placed kind of in between; so you have hot up here, which is a good thing--someone with a relationship with Christ and their witness is vibrant, and then down here is someone who’s cold—they're completely dead and turned off and want nothing to do with Christ. In between is lukewarm. These are the Christians that are wishy-washy and they ride the fences, I was told, they don’t want to refuse and reject Christ, but they really won’t take a stand; they just kind of sit there in the middle. So when Christ says, “I wish you were either hot or cold, instead of lukewarm,” he’s saying, “At least, I wish you would be on fire for me and follow me and be completely obedient, or at least I wish you would take a stand against me, but at least make known where you stand, don’t sit in the middle.” Perhaps you’ve heard Revelation 3:15-16 understood along that line. So John’s calling them to do something, “Don’t just ride the fence, even if you hate Christ or reject him, at least do that. Don’t be a fence rider.”

However, I think the way to understand this text is to understand something about the geography of Laodicea and the surrounding regions. Now that places a completely different spin on understanding this text. Laodicea was a fairly typical first century Greco-Roman city, except it had one problem that was usually considered significant and important for first century cities in the Greco-Roman world, and that was: Laodicea didn’t have a good water supply. But it’s interesting, two cities near Laodicea did. One of those cities was a city named Hierapolis. The city of Hierapolis was actually well known for its medicinal hot-springs, its mineral springs, and people would even come from some distance sometimes to sit in these springs for their healing and medicinal value. There was another town not too far from Laodicea known as Colossae, and Colossae also had a
reputation historically and geographically as being a place known for its refreshingly cold water that was good to drink. So, the problem was Laodicea had to pipe its water in from somewhere else, and by the time it got there, the water was tepid, and it was just grotesque—it really wasn’t good for much. What I think John is saying, drawing on the geography of the area, he’s saying: “I wish you were either hot or cold—that is, I wish you were hot, like the water of Hierapolis that’s good for healing, or I wish you were cold, like the refreshing water from Colossae. Instead, you’re like your own water supply; you’re lukewarm, your worthless, and I’m about to vomit you out of my mouth.” It’s like they have lukewarm, stale, stagnant water that’s been sitting there and no one wants to drink that. So, John is drawing on the geography of the area to remind the readers not to be like their own water supply.

So when we read the text from that perspective, it takes on a whole new perspective; hot and good are both positive metaphors—they're not opposites in this text. To be hot is to be like the water of Hierapolis; to be cold is like to like the good cold refreshing water of Colossae. To be lukewarm is not to ride somewhere in the middle, it’s to be the exact opposite—it’s to be useless and worthless. That’s exactly what John warns the Laodiceans of doing—of losing their witness, of being useless and worthless like their own water supply. It’s not good for anything, not good for drinking or anything else.

A better modern-day analogy than hot spiritual temperature, either hot or cold, would be: how many of you if you go into a café or restaurant, why does the waiter continually fill up your water, your cold ice-water? No one likes lukewarm water. Or why do they keep filling up your coffee cup? No one likes lukewarm coffee. You like it hot, you like your beverages hot or cold – I know there are some exceptions to that. Most of us, when you take a shower, you usually like a hot shower, not a lukewarm one. So, those, analogies provide a better fit for what John is doing. John’s instructions primarily depend on the geography of the area—Laodicea, Hierapolis and Colossae and their water supplies. I think both John intended that and I think the readers would have immediately picked up on those associations in their own day. Besides the fact that I know of nowhere in the Bible where God or Christ ever calls on his people to reject him, to either reject
him or except him. It’s always to embrace Christ and to recognize or avoid the consequences of not doing so. So I think the geographical background provides a more compelling reading of this text.

**Literary Separation**

A last and final distance is a literary distance. That is, the Old and New Testament texts are produced in a literary environment that is in many respects very different from our own. That is, the Old and New Testament are composed of literary types that may or may not have similarities to literary types of our own day and literary media of our own day. For example, a couple of examples that may have some correspondence would be narrative and stories, and also, epistolary literature. We read stories and we read narratives. We write narratives and stories, and we read and write letters. So we have some familiarity with that kind of communication. But even then, we can’t necessarily assume that story writing and narrative writing and historical recording or writing letters or poetry was identical with the way we do it today. In fact, there may be literary types that simply have no correspondence to ones in our modern day. So, for example, when’s the last time that you read or wrote an apocalypse, or when’s the last time that you read a prophecy? To compound the difficulty too is that we have a whole different medium of communication with the onset of texting and different electronic means of communication that produces a whole different in a sense “literary genre.” In order to understand the Old and New Testament, we need to be aware of the different literary types that the Old and New Testament authors wrote in and the environment in which they produced the documents, and we can’t assume again that our similar literary types are necessarily identical. So there’s a literary gap, a literary distance, that interpretation and hermeneutics helps us to overcome.

**Conclusion**

So, to summarize, hermeneutics then is a reflection on how we understand. What do we do when we read the text? What are we doing when we understand something? Hermeneutics helps us to reflect on that and be more intentional about how we do that. Interpretation, hermeneutics and interpretation, also focuses on the methods that we
utilize for interpreting a biblical text. What are the methods and the techniques necessary for coming to grips with understanding and interpreting a biblical text? But these are necessary because we are dealing with a series of documents that in many respects are very distant from us, although there’s a commonality that helps us to understand to some extent, there’s also a distance, whether it’s a temporal distance, that the documents were produced in a different time; a cultural distance, that different cultural values lie behind references in the biblical text; whether it historical events; whether it is a geographical distance or a linguistic difference; or the literary genre difference, of different literary types. Hermeneutics and interpretation helps us to bridge the gap between these distances so that we can hopefully arrive at a more informed understanding of the biblical text.

Now what we will do in the next lecture is we will look at and ask the question: What assumption about the Bible do we bring to interpreting the biblical text? Although we’ve seen hermeneutics ranges very broadly to cover any of human discipline where understanding is prominent, we’re concerned with interpreting biblical texts. So what assumptions guide the way we interpret and understand the biblical text? The next lecture will focus primarily on the character of the Bible, especially on inspiration. What do we mean by that? What does that say about the biblical text? And how does that influence and impact the way we interpret the Old and New Testament?