

# Session 7 – The Letters of Paul

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This session focuses upon interpretive techniques that are unique to the letters of Paul.

## The Genre of an Epistle

“There are various kinds of literary forms in the Bible. Each of them possesses its own rules of interpretation. The authors in using these literary forms consciously submitted themselves to the rules governing these forms in order to share their meaning with their readers. Each author assumed that his readers would interpret his words according to the rules governing that literary form.”<sup>1</sup>

Paul’s letters are the genre of epistle. An epistle is a letter written to a specific audience to address a specific situation that is also intended for a wider audience. Epistles are full of exposition. “An exposition is a straightforward argument or explanation of a body of objective truth. It is a form of writing that appeals primarily to the mind. The argument usually has a tight structure that moves from point to point in logical fashion.”<sup>2</sup>

Epistles often follow a standard format:

- Introduction: Includes elements such as the sender, the recipients, a greeting, and a prayer (of thanksgiving).
- Body
  - Doctrine: The theological of the book that expresses who Jesus is and what he has done.
  - Application: The practical part of the book that expresses how believers should live based upon the doctrine.
- Conclusion: Includes elements such as a benediction, a doxology, greetings, and an autograph.

## Indicative-Imperative Dynamic

The purpose of this section is help you understand the indicative-imperative dynamic and study with it in mind.

The words “indicative” and “imperative” describe how verbs are used in the Bible. A verb is said to be in the indicative mood when it asserts a fact or truth; a verb is in the

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Stein, *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible*, 75.

<sup>2</sup> Howard and William Hendricks, *Living by the Book*, 210.

imperative mood when it gives a command. In the Bible the indicatives precede the imperatives; or to state it another way, the imperatives of the Bible rest upon the indicatives. God's people can obey the commands of the Bible because of the facts and truths of the Bible. This is called the indicative-imperative dynamic.

Although the indicative-imperative dynamic can be seen in many books of the Bible, it is most clearly seen in the letters of Paul. The first half of his letters, the doctrine section, is full of indicatives; the second half of his letters, the application section, is full of imperatives.

## Examples

There are many examples of the indicative-imperative dynamic in Scripture.

- Before God gave Moses the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20, he reminded Moses of his name ("I am the LORD your God") and his great acts ("who brought you out of the land of Egypt").
- Before Joshua challenged the people to fear and serve the LORD and put away foreign gods in Joshua 24, he reminded them how God led Abraham to Canaan, gave him sons, sent Moses and Aaron, plagued Egypt, split the Red Sea, fought their battles, and gave them the land.
- Before Paul urged the Romans to present their bodies as a living and holy sacrifice to God in Romans 12:1, he reminded them about the previous eleven chapters, which he described as the mercies of God.
- Before Paul commanded the Galatians to stand firm and not be subjected to slavery (Galatians 5:1), he clearly explained justification by faith (Galatians 3-4).
- Before Paul implored the Ephesians to walk in a manner worthy of their calling in Ephesians 4:1, he described what it meant to be in Christ and made alive in him (Ephesians 1-3).

## Impact on Bible Study

The character of God and the actions of God provide powerful motivation for his people to obey him. The relationship that God's people have with God, especially the relationship of being "in Christ," provides the ability to obey God. These are the indicatives of the Bible. When you study the commands, exhortations, and ethics of the Bible, you must be careful to avoid divorcing them from the indicatives. God's grace motivates and enables obedience.

When you study one of Paul's letters, it may take several weeks or even months to complete. When you get to the imperatives in the second half of the book, you must remember that they rest upon the indicatives. If it has been several weeks since you covered the indicatives, you must remind yourself of them as you study the imperatives.

For example, if you are a wife and learn to be subject to your husband (Ephesians 5:22), or if you are a husband and learn to love your wife (Ephesians 5:25), but you forget that both husband and wife are in Christ (Ephesians 1:3-14), then you are learning commands that you cannot obey on your own. You will unintentionally encourage yourself to be legalistic.<sup>3</sup> You must always remember the grace of God. Learn the imperatives in light of the indicatives.

## Structural Diagram

A structural diagram is a technique for visualizing the relationships between clauses and phrases within the paragraph. It makes it easier to see the main ideas with a section. This tool is most valuable in explanation or argumentation, such as Paul's epistles.

When you create structural diagrams, do so from the NASB, ESV, LEB, or some other literal translation, as they best preserve the sentence structure of the original language.

## Steps

Here are the steps to create a structure diagram for your section:

1. Align every main (independent) clause to the left.
2. Identify all connectives (conjunctions) and underline them. Connectives are important little words that "connect" words and phrases in the text with other words and phrases, and show the nature of the relationship of a word or phrase to those that precede or follow it.<sup>4</sup> Examples include "and," "but," "so that," and "which."
3. Align every supporting (dependent) clause above (if it come before) or below (if it comes after) the word it modifies. Draw lines to clarify as needed.
4. Do the same for phrases.
5. Delete verse markers and punctuation.
6. Move terms of address out of the way (or delete them).
7. Add implied words if needed for clarity.

## Examples

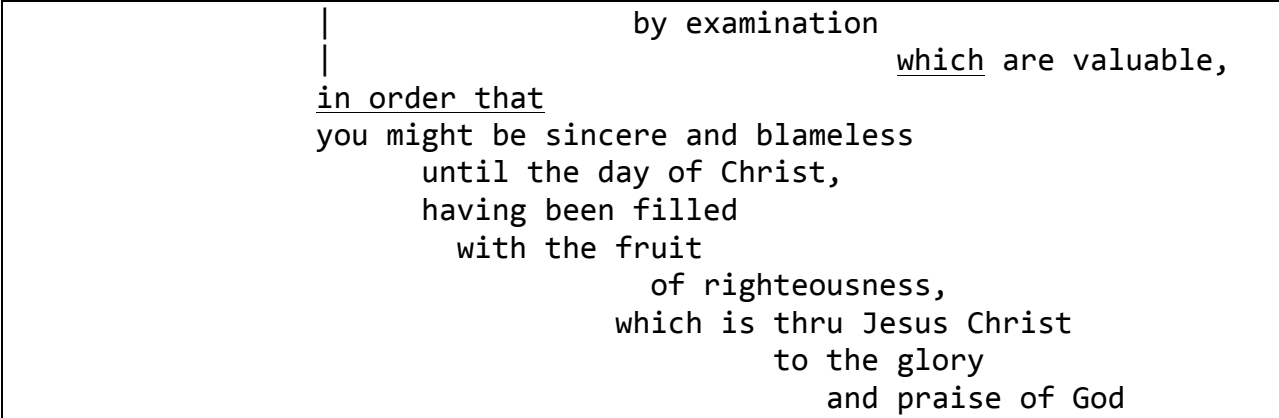
Ephesians 2:11-13: Therefore remember that formerly you, the Gentiles in flesh (called "uncircumcised" by those called "circumcised," which is done in the flesh by hands), were apart from Christ, having been excluded from the citizenship of Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, having no hope and without God in the

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<sup>3</sup> Legalism refers to obtaining salvation apart from grace, but it also refers to living the Christian life apart from grace. This was Paul's message to the Galatians: "Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now going to be made complete by the flesh?" (Galatians 3:3, HCSB)

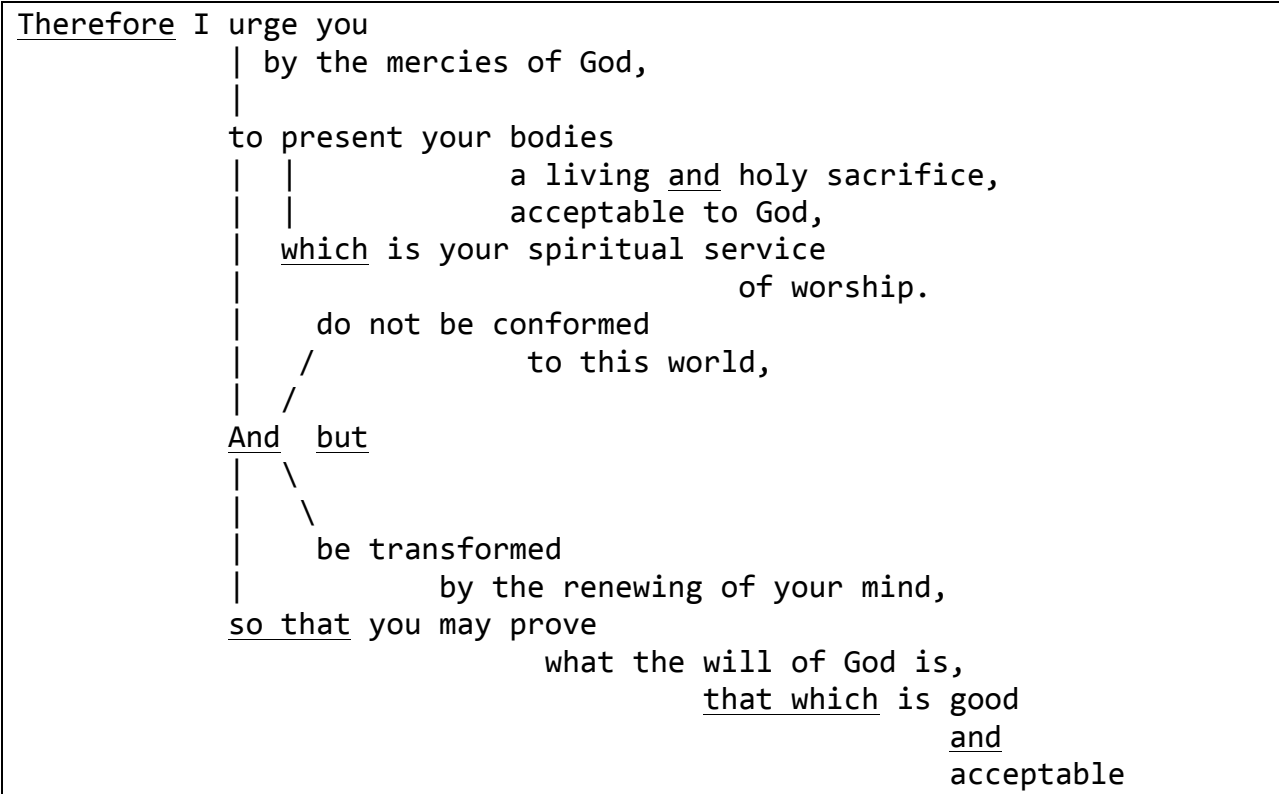
<sup>4</sup> Dr. Heisler, preaching class, SEBTS.





This diagram helps us to see that Paul’s main thought was his prayer for their growth, and that the purpose of their growth was to determine the things that are valuable and to be sincere and blameless.

Romans 12:1-2: Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.<sup>7</sup>



<sup>7</sup> NASB.

This diagram helps us to see that Paul urged the Romans to do two things. One, they were to present their bodies. Two, they were to not be conformed (negative) but be transformed (positive). The result of these things is that they would be able to prove God's will.

### Why do all this work?

Structural diagramming can really be hard, but it has benefits. One, it soaks us in the text (again). Two, it forces us to evaluate clauses and phrases and see how they relate to each other. Three, it reveals new details we haven't see before.

## Tracing the Argument

Tracing the argument is a tool to determine how it all fits together.<sup>8</sup>

Whenever a text contains explanation or argumentation, it's important to trace the argument of the writer. Every phrase and clause has a purpose, and each must be related to those before and behind. This is especially true in Paul's letters, where there are long, drawn-out, complicated arguments that make a point.

But while you are tracing the argument within a text, don't get lost in the weeds; this also applies at a higher level. Every paragraph and every section fits together in a larger sense, serving a purpose for the author.

In order to trace the argument, keep asking the questions "So what?" and "Why is this here?" Within a text ask: How do propositions within the text relate to each other?<sup>9</sup> From one section to the next ask: How does this section relate to the previous section and to the following section? Finally ask: How does this section relate to the overall purpose of the book?

Let's be honest: This can be hard stuff! But if you can't trace the argument, you're probably not understanding what Paul is doing. This tool builds upon the earlier tools of outlining and structural diagramming.

As an example, consider Ephesians 2:1-10. Paul began by describing the condition of the Ephesian believers before salvation. They were dead in their trespasses and sins (2:1), which he described in detail in verses 2-3. Having laid out this hopeless situation, Paul then gave them God's solution, salvation by faith in Jesus Christ alone (2:4-9). The

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<sup>8</sup> Thomas Schreiner, *Interpreting the Pauline Epistles*, 97.

<sup>9</sup> "A proposition is an assertion or statement about something" (Thomas Schreiner, *Interpreting the Pauline Epistles*, 99). They are often the main (independent) clauses of sentences.

result is they walk in good works (2:10). You can trace Paul's argument from problem to solution to results.

You can also trace Paul's argument between sections. In the second half of chapter 1, Paul prayed for the Ephesians (1:15-23). The pinnacle of his prayer was a desire that they should know the incomparable greatness of his power to those who believe (2:19). Paul then goes on to give two examples of the greatness of God's power. First, he makes alive those who are spiritually dead (2:1-10). Second, he brought together Jews and Gentiles into one unified group, the church (2:11-22).

Finally, you can relate this section to the overall purpose of the book. Paul wrote Ephesians to teach the young believers in Ephesus about their position in Christ and the benefits of it and to urge them to live accordingly. Ephesians 2:1-10 describes the benefits of salvation. They were made alive with Christ (2:5), which means they could communicate with God. They were raised up with him (2:6), which means they had power over sin. And they were seated with him in the heavenly places (2:6), which means they had power over Satan. This section taught them about their position in Christ.