

Dear Friends,

What shapes our thoughts and perspective of life and of the world around us? Personal experience? The ideas of a group of people we admire? The ideas of one person we admire? Or God and His self-revelation in Scripture? Jesus warned us; it can't be Him and any other source. If we choose Him and Scripture, we must abandon all other sources.

Although I realized the contradiction many years ago, recently I have been reminded strongly of the depth to which any Christian belief or service for self-gain corrupts Biblical Christianity. Working to gain heaven, to gain a higher position in heaven, or any other self-gain motive wholly corrupts and abandons the Biblical motive for Christian living and service. Paul did not nudge Timothy to study to gain a higher degree for himself, either here or hereafter. The motive Paul assigned to this study was "**...to shew thyself approved unto God.**"

Paul's world view was not shaped by the ideas or opinions of others, but by his experience with Jesus and His word. What Paul regarded as right and righteous was not ideas approved by social popularity or acceptance, but by God and His righteous character alone. How much of believers' ideas in our world today, in our Christian world, are shaped strongly by social norms, by what popular Christianity, or by what one popular teacher believes and teaches?

The more we study, truly study our Bibles and make its teachings our exclusive source for ethics and our world view, especially including how we regard both our God and each other, the more we shall comply with Paul's teaching and gain the noble approval of our God. We may hear "Well done" from those people--or that one person--around us, or we may hear it from Jesus. We shall not hear it from both.

In his writings to the two young preachers, Timothy and Titus, Paul held forth two fixed norms to guide and to safeguard believers from the hostile-to-God-and-to-God's-ways world around them. He reminded Timothy to regard his writings in 1 Timothy so that he would know how to conduct himself in the church of God, that church which belongs to God, (1 Timothy 3:15 KJV) His "...pillar and ground of the truth." And in 2 Timothy he urged Timothy to remain faithful and familiar with the "holy scriptures" that are given by inspiration of God and are ever profitable to the man of God for "...all good works." (2 Timothy 2:16-17 KJV)

What shapes our ethical and faith-view of life? That question probes the foundations of our faith and shall either reveal and affirm Scripture and God's "pillar and ground of the truth," or wholly negate both. Which do we choose?

God bless,
Joe Holder

Safeguards of "Rightly Dividing" Scripture

Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. (2 Timothy 2:15 KJV 1900)

We often remind ourselves and others of this verse. Wisely so, for it directs us to one of the foundational tools of effective Christian thinking and living. Paul didn't direct us to our imagination or to our sincerity. He directed us to Scripture. Pastors struggle with frequent frustration from sincere members who do not study the Bible to know what to do, "But I thought...." Our mind and thoughts are not sanctified or inspired. That is the reason the Lord gave us that Book we call the Bible. Put your thinking to work studying your Bible so you can understand and practice Biblical strategy to deal with your problems. Scripture's internal record, its inspired "Self-description," says that Scripture is (Not was) given of God and that it provides believers a "perfect," thorough resource for all good works. (2 Timothy 3:16-17 KJV) Can your "I thought" match that reliable resource?

While this single verse provides us with a wealth of encouragement to know and to study our Bible, part of this process of "Study" (Not speed reading or verse picking) requires that we examine the verse in its broad grammatical context. In what setting did the Lord teach us this truth?

Consider what I say; and the Lord give thee understanding in all things. (2 Timothy 2:7 KJV)

Part of the immediate context, this verse appears in the same chapter with our "Study" verse. When we read Scripture, we need to respect and accept it as if God were speaking those words to us. The idea of "*inspiration of God*" in 2 Timothy 3:16 makes that point. What is **Scripture**? The New Testament was first written in first century koine (Common man's) Greek, not Classical Greek. We are English speaking and reading. Where can we find a reliable representation of that first writing in English? The nearest we can get to that original is to find the most literal and the most **word for word translation** of that text. Most modern versions of the Bible do not claim to be a word for word translation. In most cases the editors honestly confess that they added their ideas in their humanly biased (We all are biased if we rely on our opinions) interpretation. I have more than my share of commentaries on the Bible from a wide variety of viewpoints. I respect an honest Bible student's interpretation of his ideas and understanding of Scripture. However, when I turn to my Bible, I do not want any man's interpretation or opinion. As nearly as possible, I want a word for word representation of that first Greek text in my English language. And that is precisely what we have in our King James "Translation" of the Bible. The translators approached their task committed to finding the nearest literal word-for-word translation of the Bible possible, not give us their opinion or interpretation. Most criticisms of the King James text actually highlight the rich advantages of the accuracy of that word for word representation of the Greek text. I thank the Lord for preserving the message of that first century text for me to read and to study.

When I begin my "Study" of a passage, I want to "**Consider**" the actual text, not someone's opinion or interpretation. I'd rather study the actual text and form my own interpretation. In this verse, Paul urged Timothy to "*Consider what I say,*" and that is our task as well if we hope to arrive at the message God intended to communicate to us. What is the outcome of our "Considering" the actual literal message of Scripture? "*...and the Lord give thee understanding in all things.*" The Lord requires us to study, to "Consider" the words of Scripture. When we pursue that quality of respect for Scripture, understanding comes from the Lord. Paul gave no promise of understanding, of knowing the true message of Scripture, if we study Scripture, plus human opinions and ideas, including our own, as equal to or even superior to the message of Scripture. The more we focus our minds on Scripture alone the more we may learn God's intended message for our instruction and living. More context.

Of these things put them in remembrance, charging them before the Lord that they strive not about words to no profit, but to the subverting of the hearers. (2 Timothy 2:14 KJV)

The wise pastor/preacher will focus his message on Scripture, not Scripture plus anything else. I spoke to my home church the first time at age 14. I was the youngest member of a congregation of just over a hundred people. The Lord gave me far more wisdom than I had by nature. What could a 14-year-old say to people far older and more experienced, both in life and in their faith, than I? I couldn't tell them about my experiences in life. I had not had many of them yet. I determined to dig my mind into the writings of Scripture, day and night. If I spoke right words about Scripture, words that resonated with Scripture and with their learning that far exceeded mine, they would listen. Thank the Lord, I formed a habit in that process that would last a lifetime. I'm now eighty, and I spend more time reading Scripture than anything else I read. I find the information in Scripture as fresh as when I first started reading it. The Bible is not like anything else I ever read. I believe the Lord designed it in that manner. The message of 2 Timothy 2:15 is not for a brief season at the beginning of our faith journey. It is a guidepost that endures throughout the walk of faith, no less true the last time you pick up the Bible before going to glory than the first time you read it. We learn from the words of Scripture, "rightly divided," not from splitting hairs over words either in or not in the Bible.

But shun profane and vain babblings: for they will increase unto more ungodliness. And their word will eat as doth a canker: of whom is Hymenaeus and Philetus; Who concerning the truth have erred, saying that the resurrection is past already; and overthrow the faith of some. (2 Timothy 2:16-18 KJV)

These verses follow immediately after Paul's "*Study to shew thyself approved unto God...*" verse. Our minds dwell on the freshest, the most recent information we put into it. If we feed our mind daily with significant volumes of Scripture, the mind will contemplate and meditate on those ideas. If we neglect Scripture and feed our minds with conspiracy theories, political chaos, rumors about everything under the sun, no surprise, our minds will dwell on those things. Our countenance, our words to others, and our overall interaction with others will be shaped by what we "Feed" to our minds. Feed the mind Scripture, and you meditate to be gracious and peaceable with others. Feed your mind from the alternate menu listed above, and you will be contentious, angry, suspicious, difficult, and increasingly self-focused in your interactions with others.

Paul didn't warn Timothy to ignore "*...profane and vain babblings,*" he urged him to "shun" them. Deliberately work to avoid them. He explained the need. "*...they will increase unto more ungodliness.*" Feed our minds with any diet other than Scripture, and our minds will find endless rationalizations to contradict Scripture, to form a lifestyle based on opinions formed by the "Food" we give to our mind. This danger is not my opinion; it is Paul's warning in these verses.

Contextually, this chapter sets two contrasting lifestyles and world views before us, one based on immersing our minds and lives in God and His Book, and the other immersing our minds in other ideas. In either case, what we “Plant” in our minds, what we “Feed” it, grows and spreads its influence ever wider and more controlling over our conduct. It increases “...to more ungodliness.”

Further, Paul warns, “...their word will eat as doth a canker.” “Canker” here was translated from a Greek word that refers to gangrene. Gangrene occurs when tissue in our body suffers lack of adequate blood flow to keep that tissue alive and healthy. Infection or injury isolates that part of the body from the whole. **Nothing in the life of a believer is more dangerous than to isolate ourselves from other believers, a result that grows out of non-Biblical ideas.** Often when believers do isolate themselves from others in their faith or church family, they develop a shift in their focus away from Scripture and the faith of Jesus to what they regard as important to them and to their present opinions or ideas. They already allowed spiritual infection or unattended and therefore unhealed injury to damage their spiritual health to the point that the death of their faith is imminent if not attended with repentance and contrite submission to the Lord and to His people. As they isolate themselves from their faith family, they often also isolate themselves from their regular and engaged study of Scripture. This combination makes them vulnerable to the ideas and philosophical perspectives that Paul classifies as “*profane and vain babblings,*” not profound insights and desirable knowledge from God in His Book.

Further, Paul cautions, what begins as unprofitable chatter, “*vain babblings,*” falls deeper into the pit of sin; they “...increase unto more ungodliness.” Paul’s first description of this increase in ungodliness is spiritual gangrene, “canker.” He gives a specific example. Ignoring God and Scripture, two men whom Paul knew abandoned God’s revealed faith, and started teaching (Likely also believing) a grave error regarding the resurrection. In effect, these men taught that the resurrection had already occurred, so they and the people they taught were “Left behind.” Paul categorically rejected this idea.

Nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his. And, Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity. (2 Timothy 2:19 KJV)

Paul assures us. Though faith-faltering men may go astray, and lead others astray into spiritual shipwreck, God remains ever faithful. No false teacher or his errors can shake God’s sure foundation. He knows His own children, even when they wander from the faith into error.

We can’t micro-manage another believer. We can’t protect them from false teachers, especially if they neglect their study of Scripture, leaving themselves vulnerable to errant teaching and isolation. We may warn them, admonish them, and encourage them in their faith. Beyond that, what is the faithful believer to do? Faithful or stumbling, the Lord calls every blood bought child to the same high ethic. If you name His name, if you call on Him in prayer from your heart, if you identify yourself at all with him as your Lord and Savior, His charge is simple and clear. “...depart from iniquity.” Turn to Him, to Him alone, and strive to live your life in every detail by His guiding, loving grace. Every step we take toward Him moves us back in the direction we should go to regain our tender heart and personal fellowship with Him and with His people. And for each of us, in whatever areas we may have allowed ourselves to slip, today is a good day to begin the journey back to Him.

Elder Joe Holder