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HOW TO USE THE BIBLE

2 Timothy 2:14-19

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The Basics About the Bible (3)

How To Use The Bible 2 Timothy 2:14-19

People use the Bible in all sorts of weird ways. You've probably heard the story of the guy who felt he needed some guidance from the Bible, so he opened it at random, closed his eyes and put his finger on a verse: "Judas went out and hanged himself." He thought, "That can't be God's will for me," so he tried again: "Go thou and do likewise." He knew there must be some mistake, so he tried once more: "What thou doest, do quickly!" It can be dangerous to use the Bible in the wrong way!

While we chuckle, it's no laughing matter when people really do use the Bible improperly. In 2 Timothy 2:14, Paul tells Timothy to charge those under his pastoral ministry "in the presence of God" that if they misuse the Bible, it will lead to ruin. He's talking about ultimate spiritual ruin! He names Hymenaeus and Philetus, who had gone astray from the truth, upsetting the faith of some and even leading people into further ungodliness with their misuse of the Bible! Paul is saying that...

While the misuse of the Bible leads to ungodliness,
God's people should use the Bible to grow in godliness.

The first thing we should note (and it should startle us) is:

1. It is possible to use the Bible to make progress in ungodliness (2:14, 16-18).

Note the words Paul piles up to drive home this frightening point: "useless," "ruin of the hearers" (2:14); "further ungodliness" (2:16); "spread like gangrene" (2:17); "gone astray from the truth," "upset the faith of some" (2:18). The improper use of the Bible is not an innocent, harmless activity. It leaves a trail of carnage of ruined lives in its wake. That's one reason James 3:1 warns, "Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we shall incur a stricter judgment." That's why Paul here warns Timothy to "solemnly charge them in the presence of God" (2:14). The Bible is no harmless instrument. It's a sharp sword and must be handled with proper care.

Paul mentions three improper ways of using the Bible:

- A. To use the Bible for knowledge without obedience is to use it improperly (2:14).

“Wrangling about words” (2:14) may have been Paul’s reference to an early form of Gnosticism which attempted to turn Christianity into an intellectual philosophy rather than the personal relationship with the living God which it is intended to be. It involved an intellectual approach to the Scriptures where those in the inner circle had special “knowledge” that others lacked. The point was not to grow in godliness and submission to Scripture, but rather to grow in this secret knowledge. Of course, it only fed pride and eventually led to the moral failure of those who were deceived by it.

Any time you use the Bible to grow in knowledge apart from growing in godliness, you’re heading for serious spiritual trouble. One of the most common sins Satan uses to trip us up is spiritual pride—puffing us up with supposed knowledge, without humbling us before the holiness of God. As he deceived Eve, so it’s easy for us to be led astray from the purity and simplicity of devotion to Christ (2 Cor. 11:3).

We need to be careful not to misinterpret what Paul is saying here. He is not saying that the precise words of Scripture do not matter. In Galatians 3:16 Paul builds an argument over the fact that the promise given to Abraham uses the word “seed” (singular) rather than “seeds” (plural). Jesus argued about the resurrection based on the present rather than past tense of the Hebrew verb in Exodus 3:6 (Matt. 22:32). He taught that the smallest letter of the law would not pass away without being fulfilled (Matt. 5:17). It is important to study the precise words of Scripture and to understand the nuance of the original languages so that we interpret it properly.

Nor is Paul saying that it is not necessary to grow in spiritual knowledge through Scripture. He often mentions the need for growing in spiritual knowledge and understanding (Eph. 1:17-19; Phil. 1:9-10; Col. 1:9-10). As we’ll see in a moment, accuracy in handling God’s truth is crucial. So Paul is not discouraging careful Bible study. Truth matters greatly and error always causes harm.

Rather, Paul is here combatting those who like to get into intellectual banter over obscure points of doctrine but who are not seeking to grow in obedience to God. These folks like to prove their superior intelligence by winning theological debates. But the point of Scriptural knowledge is not to fill our heads but to change our lives. To use the Bible for knowledge without application is to misuse it.

- B. To use the Bible for worldly ends is to use it improperly (2:16).

In 2:16, Paul refers to “worldly and empty chatter.” In 1 Timothy 6:20 he uses the same phrase in reference to “the opposing arguments of what is falsely called ‘knowledge.’” So he may be talking about the same thing as “wrangling about words,” namely, the Gnostic heresy. The word “worldly” means “permitted to be trod under foot,” hence, “profane, unhallowed.” It has the nuance of trafficking lightly in the things of God or of using God and the Bible for worldly gain.

This sort of thing is rampant in American Christianity in our day. The “name it and claim it” heresy is perhaps the most blatant form of it. Also, many “Christian” self-help books approach the Bible from the perspective of how to gain what you want in life, rather than reverently coming to it to learn how to please God (Col. 1:10).

Note two things here: First, such false teachers are always popular. “Their talk will spread like gangrene.” You don’t have to help gangrene to spread! Because they appeal to the flesh, these false teachers never lack a following. The literal rendering of 2:16 is that this form of teaching will make further progress, but it’s progress in the wrong way--progress in ungodliness! People who buy into this kind of false teaching often testify of how much they’ve been helped, and often, outwardly, it seems true. But any time people are helped out of their troubles without learning to depend more consciously on the living God and submit more fully to His lordship, it is false help.

Second, Christians are to avoid such teachers and their teaching (2:16). Steer clear of them. Don’t waste your time watching them on TV or reading their books. What Augustine wrote over

1,500 years ago applies here: "If you believe what you like in the gospel and reject what you don't like, it is not the gospel you believe, but yourself." By appealing to the flesh and the lure of the world, these false teachers draw away after them people who are not fully submissive to the lordship of Christ and His gospel of the cross. To use the Bible for worldly ends is to misuse it.

- C. To use the Bible to teach half-truths as truth is to use it improperly (2:18).

These men were not totally wrong. They were teaching a half-truth as if it were the whole truth, which is often Satan's method. They were teaching that the resurrection already had taken place. They had verses from Paul to back up their views. He wrote often of the fact that Christ is risen and that we are risen with Him. But he also taught that there is a future resurrection of the body, which these men denied. They argued that the resurrection was only spiritual and thus was an accomplished fact.

You may wonder, "What's the big deal? Why is this even worth contending about?" Paul answers that question in 1 Corinthians 15 where he argues that if there is no future, literal, bodily resurrection, then Christ Himself is not even raised and our faith is worthless.

Mark it well: Heresy always begins as truth out of balance! There is always an element of truth in the teachings of the cults. That's how they get their hooks in people. They even have verses to back up their errors. So they prey on the untaught who are looking for "something more" in their faith. But they lead people away from dependence on the living God. If somebody handed you a three-dollar bill with a picture of Frank Sinatra on it, you wouldn't be fooled. A counterfeit always looks genuine at first glance. That's why we have to examine the popular worldly teachings cleverly cloaked with the Bible that are flooding the church in our day. They promote half-truths as if they were the truth of God.

Before we look at the positive side of how to use the Bible to grow in godliness, let me give you three tests of sound doctrine which will keep you from being taken in by false teaching:

First, does it honor God and exalt Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord? Sound doctrine always lifts God up.

Second, does it humble proud, fallen sinners? Sound doctrine always brings sinners to the foot of the cross where they come to the end of their own pride.

Third, does it promote holiness? Sound teaching always results in obedience to the Word of God and progress in holy living. False teaching inevitably leads to ungodliness.

The fact that in four out of six verses here Paul presents the negative should cause us enough alarm to examine ourselves. Using the Bible is not enough! We can use the Bible to our own destruction! Using the Bible for knowledge without obedience, to promote worldly goals, or to teach half-truths as the truth will lead us to spiritual ruin. We need to be careful to use the Bible to grow to know God and to grow in obedience to Him. But two verses focus on the positive:

2. God's people should use the Bible to make progress in godliness (2:15, 19).

The Bible wasn't given to satisfy our curiosity or to fill our heads with facts. It was given so that we can grow in godliness. Paul shows us four ways to use the Bible properly:

A. The proper use of the Bible requires the proper approach.

"Be diligent..." The KJV ("study") communicates the wrong idea. The word means to be diligent or zealous. We are to give constant effort to the task of being approved unto God as unashamed workmen, which means handling God's Word accurately.

So many Christians are haphazard and lazy rather than diligent in their approach to God's Word. They don't systematically read, study, or memorize it. They jump from passage to passage whenever they feel like it, which isn't often. Their marriage may be hurting, their kids may be rebelling, they may be ensnared by various sins, but they don't bother to search diligently to discover what God's Word tells them to do about these problems.

The key to being diligent in God's Word is to be motivated. Motivation is the key to learning. Have you ever been on an airplane and watched the people as the stewardess gives the instructions on how to use the emergency breathing apparatus? They're reading their newspapers or impatiently thinking, "Hurry up and

get done so we can get going!" They're not motivated to hear her boring instructions. But if they're airborne and the pilot comes on the intercom and says, "Ladies and gentlemen, we're experiencing some severe trouble with our engines. We're going to have to depressurize the cabin and make an emergency landing. The stewardess is going to explain how to use the emergency breathing apparatus"--do you think he would have to add, "Please give her your full attention"? People would be motivated!

So the key to being motivated to be diligent in God's Word is to recognize, "I've got some problems I can't solve"; and, "God's Word has the only truthful answers to my problems. It alone contains God's wisdom on how to live in a way that pleases Him, which is the only way to true happiness for me. So I've got to be diligent to search out what the Scriptures say about God's wisdom for living."

B. The proper use of the Bible requires the proper relationship.

"Present yourself approved to God." "Present" is used (2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:27) to speak of a bride being presented to her bridegroom. It's a very personal, loving act when a young woman gives herself to a young man in marriage. In that culture (pre-women's lib) it meant that she was giving herself completely to him: her devotion, her time, her body, her complete focus was now toward her husband because of his love for her and her love for him.

That's how we should come to the Bible. It's not just a book of principles for how to live. It's God's love-letter that tells us of Christ's enduring love for His bride. As His bride, we should seek to please Him and be available to do His will. As such, our focus should not be on what others think of us, but on what God thinks--"approved to God." Our goal is to please our heavenly Bridegroom who loved us and gave Himself for us.

When Jim Elliot, who was later martyred in the jungles of Ecuador, was a student at Wheaton College, he wrote in his diary, "My grades came through this week, and were, as expected, lower than last semester. However, I make no apologies, and admit I've let them drag a bit for study of the Bible, in which I seek the degree A.U.G., 'approved unto God'" (*Shadow of the Almighty* [Zondervan],

p. 43). Come to the Bible to deepen your love life with the Lord, to learn how you can please Him more.

C. The proper use of the Bible requires the proper skill.

"A workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth." Here the metaphor changes from a lover to a craftsman. You're the carpenter and God's Word is your set of tools. Rather than being sloppy and nailing together a chicken coop that's about to fall down, do a decent job so that you can stand satisfied with your work.

The Bible is God's "word of truth." Truth is accurate, objective and knowable, not subjective and fluid. If a carpenter showed up at your house and didn't have a level, square, tape measure or set of plans, you'd rightly be a bit concerned. If you asked him about his methods and he said, "Well, we all have different ways of seeing things and none are absolutely right. Who's to say that your house has to be plumb and square?"—you'd be even more concerned! You want your house built carefully and accurately according to the plans.

God's Word is not the sort of thing where one person can see it one way and another person can see it another way and it really doesn't matter because no one can know what it means. Every biblical text has a fixed meaning which is true and never changes. Based on and stemming from that meaning, it may have a different significance or application for different people and at different times for the same person. But we need to use the tools of Bible study and interpretation to discover the meaning of a text in its biblical context. Otherwise, we're being sloppy workmen with God's Word of truth and we can make it mean whatever we want.

Paul says that Timothy needs to handle accurately the word of truth. "Handling accurately" ("rightly dividing" in KJV) means "to cut a path or road in a straight direction." The idea is not to get distracted off course by false teachings but accurately and straightforwardly to cut through the doctrines of Scripture so that your hearers can reach the destination of godliness.

Change doesn't come from people feeling good or liking certain ideas that they think come from Scripture. Change comes when people are confronted with God's truth and they submit their

lives to it. Thus we all, but especially those of us who teach God's Word, must be skillful and accurate so that God's people understand and submit to God's truth in these days of moral relativism.

Thus the proper use of the Bible requires the proper approach (diligence); the proper relationship (love); the proper skill (accuracy); finally,

D. The proper use of the Bible requires the proper foundation and goal.

“‘The Lord knows those who are His,’ and, ‘Let everyone who names the name of the Lord abstain from wickedness’” (2:19). It's kind of scary reading about professing Christian people who have been ruined (2:14), have gone astray from the truth (2:18), and have been upset in their faith (2:18). We may wonder, “How can I keep on the path? How can I keep from being ruined?” So Paul reminds Timothy of both the foundation and goal of the Christian life. If we remember both of these, we can have God's assurance that we are on the right path in our use of the Bible.

The foundation is, “The Lord knows those who are His.” Salvation does not begin with man; it begins with God. He planned it, He executed it. He chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4). “In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth” (James 1:18). We aren't saved by our willpower, but by God's will and power. If we aren't resting on that foundation, we can never know God's truth.

The goal is, “Let everyone who names the name of the Lord abstain from wickedness.” If God has saved us, we will have a desire to be holy people. We can be assured that we belong to the Lord because we see Him progressively working His holiness into our daily lives. In part, He does that as we're diligent to accurately study and apply His Word of truth to our lives. The goal of our use of Scripture is to grow in godliness.

Conclusion

A young man once studied violin under a world-renowned master. When his first big recital came, the crowd cheered after each number, but the young performer seemed dissatisfied. Even after the final number, despite the applause, the musician seemed unhappy. As he took his bows, he was watching an elderly man in

the balcony. Finally, the elderly one smiled and nodded in approval. Immediately, the young man beamed with joy. He was not looking for the approval of the crowd. He was waiting for the approval of his master.

Christians should be living for God's approval. We will be approved unto Him as we use the Bible to grow in godliness. May I ask, Are you being sloppy and careless in your use of God's Word of truth? Or, are you growing as a craftsman who uses it accurately and skillfully? The misuse of the Bible leads to ruin, but the proper use leads to godliness.

Discussion Questions

1. How can we know that we're interpreting the Bible correctly?
2. How can we guard against spiritual pride--that we have the "right" view of truth?
3. How do you know when a doctrine is worth fighting for and when you are merely wrangling about words?

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