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USING THE BIBLE PROPERLY

2 Timothy 2:14-19

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2 Timothy Lesson 12

Using the Bible Properly 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 use the Bible improperly. In 2 Timothy 2:14, Paul tells Timothy to solemnly charge those under his pastoral ministry "in the presence of God" that if they misuse the Bible, it will lead to ruin. We get our word "catastrophe" from the Greek word for "ruin." Paul means, ultimate spiritual ruin! He names Hymenaeus and Philetus, who had gone astray from the truth, upsetting the faith of some 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).

The words (2:16), "it will lead to further ungodliness," are literally, "they will make further progress in ungodliness." The false teachers claimed that their teaching would help you move ahead in your spiritual life. Paul sarcastically says, "Yes, you will make progress all right—progress in ungodliness!" Paul piles up words 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 a harmless activity. It destroys lives! 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, "Remind them of these things and solemnly charge them in the presence of God" (2:14). "These things" probably refers to the hymn just mentioned, which says that if we endure faithfully, we will reign with Christ, but if we deny Him, He will deny us. Maybe they've already heard it, but remind them again! Do it in the presence of God! 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) was a notorious characteristic of the false teachers in Ephesus (1 Tim. 1:6; 2:8; 6:3-5, 20-21). They liked to display their "knowledge" on peripheral matters that did not lead to godliness, but only to pride over "being right." Paul said (1 Tim. 1:5), "But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith."

Any time you use the Bible to grow in knowledge apart from godliness, you're heading for spiritual trouble. One of the most common sins Satan uses to trip us up is spiritual pride—puffing us up with supposed knowledge (1 Cor. 8:1). To know God truly in His holiness and majesty will humble us. When you study the Bible, always ask, "What does this teach me about God and about myself? How should I apply this to my life?"

We need to be careful not to misinterpret what Paul is saying here. We would be wrong to conclude that "wrangling about words" means 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 "seed" (singular) rather than "seeds" (plural). Jesus argued for 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.

Also, Paul is not saying that growing in spiritual knowledge through Scripture is unimportant. He often mentions the need to grow 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 combating 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 scholars 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.'" He may be talking about a different aspect of "wrangling about words." 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 "health and wealth" 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). It is using the Bible for worldly success.

Note two things: 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. Some of the largest churches in America use the Bible to help people succeed in their worldly, selfish goals. But don't judge a church by how big it is, but rather by how sound is the teaching in producing genuine godliness. 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 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 (*Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 4, ed. by Philip Schaff [Ages software], "Reply to Faustus the Manichaeon," Book 17, p. 432) applies here: "For to believe what you please, and not to believe what you please, is to believe yourselves, and not the gospel." 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 was this worth contending about?" Paul answers that question in 1 Corinthians 15, where he says 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 entice 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, here are three tests of sound doctrine that 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 in His majesty and holiness. It exalts Jesus as fully God and fully man, who gave Himself for our sins and was raised bodily from the dead.

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 and self-sufficiency.

Third, does it promote holiness? Sound teaching always results in obedience to the Word of God and progress in holy living. It leads to genuine love for God and love for others.

The fact that in four out of six verses here Paul presents the negative should alarm us enough to examine ourselves. Using the Bible is not enough! You can use the Bible to your own destruction! Using the Bible for knowledge without obedience, to promote worldly goals, or to teach half-truths as the entire truth will lead to spiritual ruin. We need to be careful to use the Bible to grow to know God and to grow in submission 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 about the end times or to fill our heads with facts. It was given to help us grow in godliness. Paul gives us four ways to use the Bible properly:

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

"Be diligent..." The KJV ("study") conveys 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. This especially applies to those who teach the Bible, but it also applies to all believers, who must be able to handle the Word carefully.

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. If they read it at all, they jump from passage

to passage, pulling verses out of context. They aren't seeking to know God and how He wants them to think, to believe, and to relate to others. Their lives and relationships are falling apart, but they don't 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 passengers as the stewardess gives the instructions on how to use the emergency breathing apparatus? They're reading their newspapers or impatiently thinking, "Hurry up so we can get going!" They're not motivated to hear her boring instructions. But suppose 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 live in the presence of God! Someday soon I will give an account to Him. His Word alone contains His 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 knowing God and His 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 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 oth-

ers think of us, but on what God thinks. Too many pastors fall into the trap of pleasing people, rather than pleasing God. While it's nice to be liked, my main focus is to be, "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 is that of 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 will not be ashamed when God inspects your work. If a carpenter knows that his work will be inspected by a skilled master craftsman, he will not cut corners. He will do his best so that his work will be approved.

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 be a bit concerned. If you asked him about his methods and he said, "We all have different ways of seeing things and no way is 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 that 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 each text in its biblical context. Otherwise, we're being sloppy workmen with God's Word of truth.

The word translated, "accurately handling" (KJV, "rightly dividing") means "to cut a path or road in a straight direction, so that the traveler may go directly to his destination" (*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* [The University of Chicago Press, second edition, 1958], by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, p. 580). Or, using a farming metaphor, Chrysostom said that it means to plow a straight furrow. 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 you and 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.

"Nevertheless, the firm foundation of God stands, having this seal, 'The Lord knows those who are His,' and, 'Everyone who names the name of the Lord is to 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 the foundation of the Christian life. The foundation refers to the true people of God, the church. Those who truly belong to the Lord are not carried away by false teaching. The seal on the foundation, or cornerstone, has two statements that reflect two important aspects of our salvation. These two statements come from the story of Korah's rebellion

against Moses. Moses said (Num. 16:5), "the Lord will show who is His, and who is holy, and will bring him near to Himself; even the one whom He will choose...." He warned the congregation to depart from the tents of these wicked men before God destroyed them (Num. 16:26).

Paul says that the first part of the seal is, "The Lord knows those who are His." Salvation does not begin with man; it begins with God. He planned it and 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 can't know God's truth until God has first laid hold of us and saved us from our sins by His grace alone.

The second statement is, "Everyone who names the name of the Lord is to abstain from wickedness." As Ephesians 1:4 continues, God chose us "that we would be holy and blameless before Him." We can be assured that we belong to the Lord because we see Him progressively working His holiness into our daily lives. So the foundation for using the Bible properly is that God knows us as His own and that through our diligent, careful study and application of His Word of truth, we are growing 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. Are you growing as a craftsman who uses God's Word of truth accurately and skillfully to grow in godliness? The misuse of the Bible will lead you to ruin. The proper use will lead you to godliness.

Application Questions

1. Since Bible scholars often disagree, 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? Does humility mean that we can never know that we're right?
3. How do you know when a doctrine is worth fighting for and when you are merely wrangling about words?
4. Is every Christian required to be diligent to study God's Word, or does this only apply to those gifted to teach?

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