

WHO DO WE TRUST?

Handling Scripture Accurately

2/14/21

The Problem: Mishandling Scripture Which Has Nothing to Do With:

1. **Sincerity**—many, perhaps most, people who mishandle the Word of God are sincere.
2. **Theology**—some who have their theology fairly well in place can still mishandle Scripture.
3. **Popularity**—famous, highly visible personalities in Christian circles often mishandle Scripture.
4. **Personality**—there are gifted teachers who can sway an audience yet be guilty of mishandling Scripture.

Therefore, let's put to bed, once for all, the idea that if a person just “loves the Lord,” he or she will be preserved from mishandling Scripture. No, even those of us who believe in the inerrancy of Scripture (apart from error) and affirm the importance of sound doctrine can be guilty of biblical abuse.

Biblical Abuse Mentioned in the Bible

On several occasions in the NT, people are mentioned who failed to maintain the meaning of Scripture. And in each case they were people who knew better. Many of them were professional clergymen—the scribes and the Pharisees—people in the first century who took Scripture seriously. They devoted their lives to Scripture, but they mishandled it.

- ✓ **Matthew 9:10-12 NASB** “And it happened that as He was reclining at the table in the house, behold many tax-gatherers and sinners came and were dining with Jesus and His disciples. And when the Pharisees saw this they said to His disciples, ‘Why is your Teacher eating with tax-gatherers and sinners?’ But when He heard this, He said, ‘It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick.’” Didn’t Jesus have a marvelous way of addressing the real issue?
 - But now the point! In **VS 13** Jesus quotes **Hosea 6:6** to the Pharisees: “But go and learn what this means, ‘I desire compassion, and not sacrifice,’ for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” Notice the veiled rebuke! It was as if Jesus said, “Go and learn the meaning of the verse you know by heart!”
- ✓ **Matthew 15:1-11 NASB** “Then some Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem, saying, ‘Why do your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread?’ And He answered and said to them, ‘And why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, honor your father and mother, and he who speaks evil of father or mother, let him be put to death. But you say, ‘Whoever shall say to his father or mother, “Anything of mine you might have been helped by has been given to God,” he is not to honor his father or his mother. And thus, you have invalidated the Word of God for the sake of your tradition. You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you, saying, ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me. But in vain do they worship Me. Teaching as their doctrines the precepts of men.’ And after He called the multitude to Him, He said to them, ‘Hear and understand. Not what enters into the mouth defiles the man, but what proceeds out of the mouth, this defiles the man.’”
 - Talk about severe. Jesus accused the Pharisees of twisting the Scriptures so that they fit what they want them to say. Don’t miss the pointed rebuke: “You invalidate what the Scripture says for the sake of your tradition.”
 - I love the statement made by His disciples: “They the disciples came and said to Him, ‘Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this statement.’” (Verse 12)

How to Rightly Interpret Scripture

1. Consider the Context—the scriptures around the verse or passage we are studying.

✓ Two levels of context:

- 1) **Near**—or immediate context—what comes just before or after the verse (say, one paragraph or perhaps two or three).
- 2) **Far**—or remote context—may be the preceding or next chapter, some other part of the same book or another book.

✓ Memorizing individual verses, without realizing the near and far context:

1) **Near Context: Isaiah 58:11a NASB** “And the Lord will continually guide you.”

- Preceding this hopeful statement are two **if clauses**: First, the Lord will guide you **if** you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk. Second, the Lord will guide you **if** you pour yourself out for the hungry (Isaiah 58:9-10).

2) **Far Context: John 9:3 NASB** contains the phrase, “Neither hath this man sinned nor his parents.”

- Does this mean that those three persons were sinless? By itself, the sentence could mean that, yet we know that it does not because the Bible (far context) clearly teaches elsewhere that no one, apart from Jesus Christ, is sinless (Romans 3:9-10, 23).
- But suppose someone objects, “This verse is part of the Bible, and no matter what other verses teach, this verse says that these three people were sinless” How can we persuade him/her that he or she is wrong?
- But the near context. Jesus was answering a question of His disciples (VS. 2). Their question was not, “Have these people sinned?” Rather they had asked, “Who sinned...that he was born blind?” In other words, “This man’s blindness is the result of whose sin, his own or his parents?” Jesus gave a straight answer, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.”
- So, the near and far context helps to make clear what otherwise is puzzling, what apparently contradicts the teaching of other Scripture passages.

3) **Guidelines for determining Context:**

- Think of and write down all possible meanings you can for the verse (or word, phrase, sentence, etc.).
 - Read the verse in context. Do not skimp by reading only a few verses. Note the connections between words and thoughts.
 - Note any main words that are repeated. Do not include common ones like “and” or “the”. Especially be alert for any word in the verse which is repeated in the verse’s context. It may indicate a major theme and the relations between the parts.
 - Try to write the section (your verse in its context) in your own words. This will show if you understand the section and can express the thought clearly.
- Try to answer the question: What does this verse mean in its context? If you cannot answer it, you may need to study more. There are difficult verses, however, on which even scholars do not agree, so do not be discouraged if you cannot always arrive at a clear understanding. Here are some examples of difficult verses to study in context:
 - **Romans 14:4**—Does this mean that Christians should never judge other Christians?
 - **Psalms 137:4**—Are Christian hymns only for one’s native land?
 - **Luke 16:15**—Does this apply to such things as secular education and the use of electricity for lighting?

- **Special Note:** there are parts of Scripture where context is not important. For example, many of the proverbs seem to be independent statements of truth without relation to the verses before and after them. But their very nature proverbs are short, pithy statements, complete in themselves. Also, the authors of the narrative portions of Scripture had to select certain incidents, facts, and discourses, while omitting others. So, there cannot be full continuity. Often they placed together units that did not occur together. Yet, despite some exceptions, the first principle of interpretation still stands: Interpret in the light of context!

2. Understand the Words—interpret according to the correct meaning of the words.

✓ Helpful hints in discovering the meaning of words:

- 1) **Consider the context**—in Revelation 5:5 the word lion refers to Christ, but in 1 Peter 5:8 the devil is likened to this animal!
- 2) **Words can change their meaning over time**—When the Bible was first translated, the word prevent meant “go before.” Now over 410 years later, its common meaning is “hinder” or “stop”. See 1 Thessalonians 4:15 in the AV. IN 1611 when people read “shall not prevent them,” they understood it to mean “will not precede them” (as in the ASV and RSV). **Bottom line:** We must be sure that what a word means to us now is what it meant when the translation we are using was made.
- 3) **Different words may have the same or similar meaning.** We should not think that every time the Bible uses different words the meaning must be different. See the way Matthew 20:21 and Mark 10:37 uses kingdom and glory; and Matthew 18:9 and Mark 9:47, life and Kingdom of God.

✓ How to study words:

- 1) **Look up the word in a dictionary.**
- 2) **Study the word in its context.** 2 Samuel 2:14 KJV says, “And Abner said to Joab. ‘Let the young men now arise and play before us.’” Its sounds like he’s initiating a game, but the context shows that play means to kill.
- 3) **Use a concordance.** This will help one discover patterns of how different authors use a word.

3. Understand the Grammar

- ✓ Interpret according to the grammar of the sentence.
- ✓ Critical commentaries such as The Word Biblical Commentary or The NIV Application Commentary are excellent in highlighting grammar when it matters!

4. Grasp the authors Intention—interpret according to the authors purpose & plan

- ✓ The purpose of the author is the object he/she has in mind for writing.
- ✓ The plan of the author is the way he/she structures the writing in order to carry out the plan.
- ✓ More on Purpose & Plan.
 - **Note whether the purpose is stated or not**—sometimes this is easy as with 1 John 5:13, “I write this to you...that you many know that you have eternal life.” Other times one will have to look for indications of it. This is done by reading the letter as a whole until the author’s intention is clear.
 - **Personal references to the readers usually indicates a books’ purpose**—Philippians 4:2-3 is an example.
 - **Look for the structure of the book**—this is where one outlines the book.

- When the purpose and plan is clear, then study each portion of the book with that in mind, being sure that your interpretation squares with it.

5. Study the Background—interpret in light of the historical, geographical and cultural background, as far as that can be known

✓ How can one learn this information:

- 1) **Learn the Bible**—read, read, read it! The more you are familiar with the whole Bible, the more you will have background knowledge to help you in interpretation.
- 2) **Make notes as you read**—write down details about Bible characters, customs, features of the land.
- 3) **Use maps in your Bible to locate geographical points.**
- 4) **Use helps**—commentaries, Bible encyclopedia's and Bible dictionaries.

Which Version of the Bible Should I Use

Serious followers of Jesus recommend using up to four to six different translations and some paraphrase's and here's why:

Translations—of which there are two kinds:

- 1) **A Formal Equivalent** reading is a literal reading (almost word for word from manuscripts; very choppy) is recommended in order to see the flow of the Greek or Hebrew language. The English Standard Version, New American Standard Bible and New King James Version are good for this
- 2) **A Dynamic Equivalent** reading (where the translators took the liberty to put in our words what they believe the manuscripts are saying) is recommended in order to understand what is being said (assuming the translators are correct). The New Living Translation and New International Version will suffice here.

Paraphrases—goal is not the translation of the Bible but the rendering of the Bible into a work that retells all or part of the Bible in a manner that accords with a particular set of theological or political doctrines. Here's my top four paraphrases:

- 1) The Message
- 2) The Passion Translation
- 3) The Living Bible
- 4) The Amplified Bible

Root Issue

How can you guard against “biblical abuse” as you teaches others or even as you represents God and Scripture in a casual conversation? If you realizes that you have been using Scripture in a “roof text” manner, determine right now to always study the context so that you will maintain the meaning.

If the Bible you use is full of notes and comments from an unreliable source, seriously consider purchasing another Bible! Starting over with clean, unmarked pages can lead to a fresh path to the truth!

Recommended Books

1. How to Read the Bible for All it's Worth—by Gordan Fee and Douglas Stuart
2. The Blue Book of Grammar and Punctuation—by Jane Straus
3. You Are Blessed: In the Names of God—by Sylvia Gunter

