

Dear Friends,

Hopefully this paragraph is not necessary. However, on occasion we meet very sincere believers with good intentions who misinterpret a passage from Jesus regarding their preaching or teaching. In the setting of Jesus sending out the disciples, he warned that they and their message would not always be welcomed. At times they might even be arrested and brought before the local magistrates. Jesus taught them the following lesson specific to their being required to answer to the magistrates, not at all to their preaching.

But when they deliver you up, take no thought how or what ye shall speak: for it shall be given you in that same hour what ye shall speak. (Matthew 10:19 KJV)

But when they shall lead you, and deliver you up, take no thought beforehand what ye shall speak, neither do ye premeditate: but whatsoever shall be given you in that hour, that speak ye: for it is not ye that speak, but the Holy Ghost. (Mark 13:11 KJV)

And when they bring you unto the synagogues, and unto magistrates, and powers, take ye no thought how or what thing ye shall answer, or what ye shall say: For the Holy Ghost shall teach you in the same hour what ye ought to say. (Luke 12:11-12 KJV)

Not once anywhere in the New Testament did an inspired writer--or Jesus Himself--teach us to approach our preaching with a "Take no thought" attitude. Our study passage for this lesson teaches the mirror opposite. It requires present (The ever present, never ceasing), prayerful, and intense study. The verse also reminds us. Our objective in this study is not to gain the best insight into the passage so as to preach the best sermon. Every preacher would love to do that every time he enters the pulpit. Our right objective in such intense study is "...to shew thyself approved unto God." A preacher should study, just as a member, to learn as much as possible regarding wise and faithful personal discipleship. The more we equip ourselves with Scripture alone for Biblical New Testament faithful discipleship the more we shall be able to encourage and to help our brothers and sisters in the faith, to "Edify" them in their spiritual journey.

Let the study begin,

Joe Holder

“Study” the Bible

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)

I have long encouraged people to read their Bibles from cover to cover over a measured time, say a year. However, for the serious believer, this habit is not the end, but a bare beginning that slowly prepares us for serious “Study” of Scripture. A systematic and thorough knowledge of Scripture requires both “Breadth” and “Depth.” Repeatedly reading the Bible cover to cover eventually leads to breadth, but it contributes little to the depth of Bible knowledge. I’m reminded of a simple anecdote I heard many years ago that explains the difference between breadth and depth in practical terms. A contractor needed to hire a carpenter. He advertised for someone who had “Depth” of experience, someone whose training and experience would enable him to do whatever he was assigned to do with skill and knowledge. One of the men he interviewed told him that he had twenty years of experience as a carpenter. The contractor hired the man. Shortly it became painfully evident that the man was not qualified. In the “Exit interview” when the contractor fired the man, he explained, “When I interviewed you, you told me that you had twenty years of experience and training. My assessment of your actual skill level is that you have one year of experience repeated twenty times.” Is this true of believers and their maturity in the faith?

How important is it that a believer invest the time and energy to truly “Study” the Bible? Consider the verse. “...to shew thyself approved unto God.” If we neglect this kind of enduring relationship with our Bible, we cannot—we shall not—reach that blessed state of the Lord’s approving our thoughts or conduct. We choose to forfeit the richest blessings of life by our neglect. In effect, we have the potential of access to a bank account with a million dollars in it, but we deliberately choose to ignore it and continue living hand to mouth. Why? There is no wise reason.

If we accept the lesson this verse teaches, we cannot possibly gain the Lord’s “Approval” of our lifestyle, choices, and ideas apart from this devoted “Study” of Scripture. To borrow from Jeremiah’s weeping grief, there is abundance of “...balm in Gilead,” we have the best “...Physician” ever, but we remain sick. Our lingering sickness is not due to bad medicine or to an incompetent physician. There is one reason for our continuing spiritual disease. We refuse to listen to our Physician and to take His medicine.

Is there no balm in Gilead; is there no physician there? why then is not the health of the daughter of my people recovered? (Jeremiah 8:22 KJV)

To put our self-made and self-perpetuated dilemma in New Testament terms, we know the price of blessings discipleship requires, self-denial and growing conformity to Jesus’ teaching and lifestyle, but we are not willing to pay that price. Sadly, so long as professing believers in Jesus follow this unbelieving pattern of sin, not faith, they shall never comprehend the blessings they lose.

Let’s try to unpack some of Paul’s teaching in this verse.

1. "Study." Mounce defines the Greek word translated as "Study" in this verse as such intense labor that the worker's posture is "Bent over." Other definitions include ideas of making haste, engaging the work with zeal and strong commitment. Clearly the lesson requires a serious and enduring habit of "Study," not speed reading Scripture. Give yourself an honest "Report card" on this teaching. During the last two years, how much time have you spent in studying your Bible, and how much time in reading about COVID and/or political chaos? Does the Lord know the answer to that question? Have we sufficiently studied to gain His "Approval"? Do we care if we hear His "Well done good and faithful servant," or not? Perhaps we need to go to our knees, pray for His forgiveness, and adjust our time schedule?

Thayer's New Testament Greek Dictionary defines this word as "Make haste." If we are required to "Make haste" in this "Study," it must be our top priority, more important for us to know than anything else in our life. Do we so regard our Bible and the wisdom it contains? Does our time with it, compared to our time with other reading material, prove that priority?

2. "Approved." Mounce defines the Greek word translated "approved" in this verse as "...approved after examination and trial." Do we think we can ignore the Lord and His teaching in His Book and yet gain His approval after He examines and tests us? He only approves His children who turn from self to Him alone in thought, word, and deed. The consequences are truly life changing. Over a near lifetime of preaching and pastoring, I have witnessed the dramatic difference. I've seen children of the King rejoicing and happy in the gospel slowly slip into anger and confusion. The Lord's "Medicine" is on the shelf, never taken to heart and applied to their spiritual illness. The Physician's diagnosis was accurate, but they refused to listen to Him, choosing to reject Him, His diagnosis and remedy in favor of the latest rumor medicine, the endless array of human pseudo-wisdom that suggests cures contradictory to Scripture, but they never cure the malady. In the Lord's temporal judgments, and in the severe chastening that inevitably follows, these wandering souls seldom consider abandoning all their imaginations and returning to the Lord and His way alone, the reason many pastors lose sleep. So did Paul. (2 Corinthians 11:28 KJV)

What does it mean to "Study" Scripture? The answer goes far, far beyond the scope of this week's writing, but let's consider some basic strategies.

1. Prayer. Any worthwhile spiritual endeavor should start with prayer. Pray for the Lord to direct you to that portion of His Word that you need for your present challenges in your faith walk. And pray also for His wise grace to open your mind to the meaning and application of that Scripture to your life, to your actual thoughts, words, and deeds. (2 Timothy 2:7 KJV; we must "Consider" what we read, prayerfully and seriously, not casually or theoretically. But true "Understanding" comes from the Lord)

2. Focus. You can't "Bite off" the whole Bible in one mental bite and absorb its meaning. What part of the Bible is nearest to us in terms of its setting and application? I suggest that the church and pastoral letters, Romans to 2 Timothy, if not inclusive to Jude, most directly address our present situation and need. What part of this section might inform your present need? This takes us back to prayer. If you have regularly and faithfully read all of Scripture, you should have a sense of the thematic content of the various letters. Seek the Lord's guidance to point you to the Biblical context that most addresses your questions.

In symbolism of your mindset, set aside your mental “Telescope” and pick up your mental “Microscope.” Start with a chapter that most highlights your problem. Read it, read it, and read it again, pondering what it says. “Listen” to what it says. Don’t try to force it to say what you want to hear. Listen to what it says as literally and clearly as possible.

Now expand your scope. Read the chapters before and after this focus chapter. Study them. Expand further to the whole book or letter in which this chapter appears. Spend much time pondering the identity and the spiritual state and mindset of both the inspired writer and audience. Is the letter a rebuke or a commendation? Does it approve of what the audience was doing, disapprove, or simply instruct them in the right way to do what they are commanded in the letter to do? We can’t possibly uncover a sensible and right meaning for our life and need until we have firmly learned the correct meaning of the passage which the Holy Spirit intended to communicate to the first readers.

3. Take the lesson seriously. Even before you start your study, pray and commit to the Lord that you will accept, believe, and implement what He teaches you from His Word. If you go to the Scripture with a skeptical attitude, not seriously committed to practicing what it teaches, do you think the Lord doesn’t know your duplicity? Why should He reveal anything to you, if He knows you’ve already decided not to obey what He teaches?

...rightly dividing the word of truth. As Peter wrote (2 Peter 3:16 KJV), people are prone to misinterpret the Scriptures. Peter’s word, “wrest,” means to literally twist out of joint, as with a joint in your body. The obvious point is that people tend to make up their minds what they believe before they study the Scriptures. They study Scripture, not to learn the truth, but to find a way to twist the intended meaning to suite their imagination. Do these people honestly think they can negotiate truth with God, convince Him to change His truth and agree with them? Consider the contrast between “Wresting” the Scriptures to our own destruction and “...rightly dividing the word of truth.” Paul describes Scripture as the “word of truth.” Scripture is all truth and only truth. Our twisting of Scripture only ensures the destruction of our faith and those whom we influence. God is not impressed.

“rightly dividing” was translated from a Greek word that literally means to “Cut straight.” Paul was a tent maker by trade. Consider him talking to a customer. He learns the size and configuration of the tent the customer wants. Then he would “Cut straight” along the pattern necessary to make the precise tent the customer specified. When I was a child, my mother often made her own dresses. She would find a pattern she liked, buy it and the material she needed to make the dress. She knew how to read the pattern and cut the cloth precisely to the pattern’s requirements. When we approach the Scriptures, we are required to be just as precise in learning the Spirit’s intent with the passage we study, to interpret the passage exactly as the Spirit intended. Otherwise, we deceive ourselves and reach false conclusions regarding its teaching. If we fail to “Cut straight,” to rightly interpret a passage, we only deceive ourselves. We do not change God’s mind, and we do not alter His truth.

Elder Joe Holder