

Getting it Right

2 Timothy 2:14-19

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The Bible clearly says, “*There is no God.*” Does that surprise you? I’m not making that up. This strong statement comes as a direct quotation from Psalm 14:1. That’s a problem, isn’t it? How could the Bible, which is all about God, say that there is no God? How do we handle something like this? Does that rattle your faith? Anyone have a solution for this?

Hang on. Before you think I’ve gone hurtling into heresy, let’s actually look at this text in context. Here’s what Psalm 14:1 says, “***The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’***” And this is just half of the verse. Here’s the rest: “***They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds; there is none who does good.***” A fool does not believe there is a God and as a result he behaves grossly. If you’re an atheist, there’s nothing to keep you from doing abominable deeds. If there’s no God, then why be concerned about doing good things? Reading this phrase in context changes everything, doesn’t it?

A text taken out of context is a pretext for a proof text. The Bible is a life-changing book but used in the wrong way, it can be dangerous.

In his book called, “*The Most Misused Verses in the Bible,*” Eric Bargerhuff describes how subtle Satan is when it comes to attacking the Word of God. Satan wants us to misinterpret and misquote Scripture as he seeks to undermine God, which is what he did all the way back in the Garden of Eden. God had given specific commands to Adam in Genesis 2:16-17 regarding the trees in the garden. He could enjoy all of them, except he was not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, lest he die. It was his job to teach Eve this command once she was created.

Listen to how sinister the Satan is as he undermines God’s voice in Genesis 3:1: “***Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, ‘Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’***” His first ploy was to cast doubt in Eve’s mind: “*Did God actually say...?*” Notice next that the serpent intentionally misquotes God: “*You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?*” Satan expanded what God said to make it seem like God was prohibiting them from eating of *any* tree.

In verses 2-3, Eve herself adds to the command: ***“And the woman said to the serpent, ‘We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.’”*** God never told Eve she couldn’t “touch” the tree. In verse 4 Satan negated the penalty of death God had given when he said to Eve: ***“You will not surely die.”*** Satan’s big lie is that we can sin and get away with it. In verse 5, the serpent questions God’s character by suggesting He was jealous: ***“For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God...”***

Bargerhuff writes, *“The serpent wanted [Eve] to see God’s restrictive commands in a new light, to perhaps understand them differently from what was originally intended, and to give them a new context.”* He continues, *“At the heart of all human sinfulness is lawlessness and the prideful appeal to be our own god...to doubt the trustworthiness of His Word. And all we need to do in order to start down that path is to give Scripture a new context, twist its meaning, or interpret it in a way that appeals to the supremacy and glory of man.”*

In an effort to make sure we’re interpreting and applying Scripture correctly, we’re kicking off a new series this weekend called, “Context.” We’ll be setting some of the most misquoted and misunderstood verses in the Bible in their respective contexts so that we can both learn and live them out in our relational contexts.

Next week we’ll be unpacking the phrase, ***“Where two or three are gathered in my name.”*** In two weeks Pastor Kyle will be helping us learn what ***“The truth will set you free”*** really means as we celebrate what God is doing in our student ministry. Other topics in the series include what Jesus meant when he said, ***“Judge not,”*** how the context of Jeremiah 29 helps us better understand the depth of, ***“For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope”*** and we’ll also unpack the commonly misquoted motto: ***“Money is the root of all evil.”***

It’s no small matter to misuse Scripture. Please turn or click to 2 Timothy 2:14-19 where we will see that caving on Scripture can lead to catastrophe. But first let’s set the context. The Apostle Paul is in prison and is writing to a younger pastor named Timothy, who he had the joy of leading to the Lord – in 1 Timothy 1:2 he refers to him as ***“my own son in the faith.”***

Paul knows that his death is near so he writes with a bold, clear call for his young ministry partner to live on mission, and to continue the fight of faith no matter how hard it gets. He warns Timothy about false teachers and urges him to work diligently to interpret and apply the Word of God to the world he lives in.

Paul urges Timothy to not be ashamed of the Lord in chapter one by guarding what's been entrusted to him. In the first part of chapter two, he uses three analogies to communicate the necessity of staying faithful and focused – we're to be obedient like soldiers, disciplined like athletes and persistent like farmers. In verses 8-13, Paul urges Timothy to remember Jesus Christ so that he doesn't deny Him.

And then we read these words in verses 14-19: ***“Remind them of these things, and charge them before God not to quarrel about words, which does no good, but only ruins the hearers. Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth. But avoid irreverent babble, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness, and their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have swerved from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already happened. They are upsetting the faith of some. But God’s firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: ‘The Lord knows those who are his,’ and, ‘Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity.’”***

Let's drill down into verse 15: ***“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.”*** We could summarize this verse like this: *Work hard at handling the Word of God because how we handle God's Word determines whether we'll be an approved worker or an ashamed wanderer.*

If we want to get it right, we must go after it with all our might. There are three imperatives from this passage.

- Stay hungry
- Work hard
- Correctly handle

1. Stay hungry. The phrase, ***“Do your best”*** means, *“to make every effort, to be intensely earnest and eager.”* It suggests zealous concentration and dedicated diligence. This phrase is in the aorist imperative, meaning it's a command to do it

now, without delay, so one can accomplish the objective. To borrow from the title of the devotional by Oswald Chambers, we're to do "*our utmost for His highest.*"

I saw this earnestness this week when our grandson Pip was here. When he was hungry, the whole house knew it! While Lydia weighed out and prepared his special foods, he clamored and complained that she wasn't fast enough. I was reminded of 1 Peter 2:2: "***Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation.***"

I'm concerned that too many Christians are coasting instead of craving God's Word. I wonder if it's because we're too full of other things? Proverbs 23:12: "***Apply your heart to instruction and your ear to words of knowledge.***"

Paul tells Pastor Timothy "***to present yourself to God...***" This word speaks of a bride being presented to her groom. The idea is "*to stand near or before, to show.*" We must do our best because we are standing before the face of God. That's what the Latin phrase, "*Coram Deo*" means.

What we're ultimately looking for is to be "***one approved,***" which comes from being tested by trials and being fortified by fire. Here's our choice – we either seek the approval of others or we make every effort to be approved by God.

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

2. Work hard. In the middle of verse 15 we're told to see ourselves as a "***worker who has no need to be ashamed.***" The idea here is of a craftsman or artisan who toils tenaciously so that he or she will not be ashamed when the work is inspected. *Work hard at handling the Word of God because how we handle God's Word determines whether we'll be an approved worker or an ashamed wanderer.* Paul put it like this in Philippians 1:20: "***As it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death.***"

By the way, this is the verse AWANA gets its name from: *Approved Workmen Are Not Ashamed.* Awards night for AWANA is this Wednesday.

If we're seeking God's approval so that we're not ashamed, we must *stay hungry* and *work hard*. There's one more critical ingredient.

3. Correctly handle. This final phrase is in the present tense, meaning we're to always be ***“rightly handling the word of truth.”*** This word for ***“rightly handling”*** comes from the Greek word *orthos* meaning, *“straight”* and *temno* meaning, *“to cut.”*

This word was used in a number of different ways.

- Tent makers would precisely cut pieces of leather to be sewn together.
- It referred to cutting a path in a straight direction, so that travelers could take the most direct route to their destination.
- It was also used in farming to refer to plowing a straight furrow.
- In addition, this phrase was used to describe the cutting up of bread before serving.

When the Scriptures are “cut straight” we can see how all the pieces fit together, it will help us go in the right direction and we'll receive the nourishment we need to grow. Here at Edgewood we serve up the Scriptures in as straightforward a fashion as we can. We're not interested in softening them by watering down the Word or caving into the culture because we seek the approval of God, not people. We're aiming to be holy, not hipster.

I read an interesting article in Christianity Today this week that started off like this: *“Despite a new wave of contemporary church buzzwords like relational, relevant, and intentional, people who show up...are looking for the same thing that has long anchored most services: preaching centered on the Bible...sermons that teach about Scripture are the No. 1 reason Americans go to church...even as congregants' media diet and attention spans shift, they remain engaged in straightforward preaching of the Word.”* That's certainly true of Edgewood!

Matt Woodley made this statement in Preaching Today's annual State of Preaching: *“In a distracted, outraged, shallow culture, people begin to hunger for something rare: the focused, balanced, and deep...deep preaching is our best chance to change lives.”*

In a world of “fake news,” aren’t you glad that the Bible is the “**word of truth**”? I love the prayer that Jesus prayed for his followers in John 17:17: “**Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.**”

That reminds me of what happened with a Christian woman who did a lot of flying for her job. Air travel made her extremely nervous, so she always took her Bible along to read. On one flight, she found herself sitting next to a man who smirked when she pulled out the Scriptures.

After awhile, he turned to her and asked, “*You don’t really believe all that stuff in there, do you?*” The lady replied, “*Of course I do. The Bible is true.*” To which he responded, “*Well, what about the guy who was swallowed by the whale?*” She replied, “*Oh, Jonah. Yes, I believe that. It’s in the Bible so it’s true.*” Still smirking, the man asked, “*Well, how do you suppose he survived all that time inside the whale?*” The lady replied, “*Well, I don’t really know. I guess when I get to heaven, I’ll ask him.*” To which the man snidely and sarcastically asked, “*What if he isn’t in heaven?*” To which the lady answered, “*Then you can ask him.*”

In order for us to get the most from the Bible that we can, I want to flesh out some principles for how we will be approaching this series. *We must work hard at handling the Word of God because how we handle God’s Word determines whether we’ll be an approved worker or an ashamed wanderer.*

The most important rule for interpreting the Bible is to *understand the context*. To say it another way, we must pay attention to the historical, cultural and geographical background of every passage we read.

Recently I had the honor of answering Bible questions on Moody Radio. While I’m happy to help, I was a bit keyed up because it’s a live program. The first time I did it I was given the questions in advance, which really helped. When I was on the air the second time, I had a couple questions ahead of time but three others came in during the program.

Towards the end of the time I was asked a question from the opening verses in the Gospel of John. As I recall, it went something like this, “John 1:29 uses the phrase, ‘**The next day,**’ John 1:35 says, “**The next day,**” and then John 1:43 says the ‘**next day.**’ As I count that’s four days – one day, the next day, the next day and the next day. If that’s true, why does John 2:1 begin this way: “**On the third**

day...?” I thanked the listener for the question as I stalled for time. I quickly glanced at my Bible and started getting sweaty. I fumbled around for a bit and then finally said, *“I don’t have a clue but I’ll get back to you.”* I haven’t been asked back yet so my career as the Bible Answer man was very short-lived!

When I got back to the office I opened my Bible and read the whole passage in context and it suddenly made a lot of sense. I should have seen it earlier but I was too worked up. I asked for the email of the listener and then sent this response to her:

*“Thanks for the great question this morning on Moody Radio! Sorry that I didn’t do a good job answering it on the air. As I read the context more carefully, **“on the third day”** from John 2:1 means that it was three days after the calling of Philip and Nathanael (1:43). We know from 1:28 that they were initially in Bethany (Judea) and then Jesus traveled to Cana in Galilee (see 2:1). The distance between Bethany and Cana is approximately 80 miles, which would have taken 2-3 days to travel on foot. Thus, when we read in 2:1 that it was **“on the third day,”** it means that three days after the conversation with Philip and Nathanael, after traveling from the south to the north, Jesus was invited to the wedding with his disciples (see 2:2).”*

Context is king. When someone asks you a Bible question or quotes a verse out of context, take a deep breath and make it a practice to read what comes before and what comes after.

I recently came across a very helpful book called *“Context: How to Understand the Bible”* by Jim Nicodem. He shares a number of very helpful principles but I’m going to mention just two.

1. Cross the Cultural Rivers. If you’ve ever traveled to another country you know the challenge of crossing cultures. In a similar way, when reading the Book of Proverbs, you’re going to have to travel from a twenty-first-century, Western, technological society to a tenth-century B.C., Middle Eastern, agrarian society. If you’re reading the New Testament letter of 1 Corinthians, you’ll cross into a first-century A.D., Greco-Roman, and urban culture.

If we don’t cross these cultural rivers, we won’t understand much of what we read. As an example, Nicodem refers to the Book of Ruth. Ruth is a destitute widow with a distant relative named Boaz, who buys her a piece of property. Ruth 4:7

tells us that the guy who sells Boaz the land seals the deal by handing Boaz his sandal. My guess is that someone didn't give you a sandal when you closed on your house! An understanding of the culture at that time is extremely helpful because the sandal-passing custom was a way for the seller to say: *"The property that I used to walk on as my own now belongs to you."*

You may be thinking that there's no way you can discover these cultural connections on your own. But let me give you some great news! You don't have to go to Bible school or seminary to learn all this. Here's a simple suggestion – pick up a good study Bible and use it when you're reading the Bible. Think of a study Bible as a bridge that will enable you to cross cultural rivers. I highly recommend the ESV Study Bible – that's the one I use for my daily reading. I also like the MacArthur Study Bible, the Jeremiah Study Bible and the Life Application Bible.

2. Ask the Journalistic Questions. A good reporter relentlessly asks five "w" questions – we have four "G's" and now we have five "W's"! Here they are – *who, what, when, where* and *why*.

- **Who Questions.** For instance, if you were to read the Book of Jonah, it would be very important to know who the Ninevites were because that's who Jonah is told to preach to. Instead of obeying, Jonah jumps on a ship and heads in the exact opposite direction. He was eventually thrown overboard and ends up in the belly of a giant fish. That's where he decides to send up some prayers and then the fish chucks him up on the beach and he ends up reluctantly preaching to the Ninevites.

Nineveh was the capital city of ancient Assyria and the superpower of Jonah's day. The Assyrians were the archenemies of Israel and were notorious for beheading their victims and stacking up their heads in piles or skinning their captives alive. It makes sense why Jonah tried to get out of his assignment, doesn't it? Simply knowing the *who* of a Bible passage enables you to better interpret it.

- **What Questions.** When you read the Bible, you'll come across some practices or words that don't make sense in our society. For example, Psalm 1:4 tells us that the wicked ***"are like chaff that the wind drives away."*** For most of us city slickers, we don't have a clue what this means. Again, a study Bible is so helpful.

Chaff is the thin, outer husk that surrounds a kernel of wheat. In the ancient world before John Deere combines, farmers would thresh their wheat by throwing it up in the air where the useless chaff would blow away and the hard kernels would then fall to the ground. The psalmist is telling us that if we're not anchored to the Word our wicked lives will be blown away.

- **When Questions.** Knowing *when* a book was written is also really helpful. For instance, the theme of the Book of Philippians is joy. This is incredible because Paul wrote this book when he was in prison. Knowing the “when” helps us understand that joy is possible even when our circumstances are bad.
- **Where Questions.** One example of the importance of asking the *where* question is found in Revelation 3:15-16: ***“I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth.”*** These words from Jesus are given to a church located in a town called Laodicea. Knowing a little about Laodicea helps us understand this passage.

You see, Laodicea had a problem with its drinking water. The local river was too muddy so water had to be brought in by an aqueduct. The water originated from a cool spring five miles away but by the time it reached the town it was tepid and tasted terrible. One swallow and you'd want to spew! Because of *where* they lived, this church got the message quickly that Jesus didn't want them to be spiritually lukewarm.

- **Why Questions.** There are a lot of *why* questions to ask but here's one example of why asking *why* is so important. Have you ever wondered why Elijah confronted the false prophets of the pagan god Baal on top of Mount Carmel? You can read more about this in 1 Kings 18. God's people had caved into idol worship so God sent his prophet Elijah to duke it out with the priests of Baal. A spiritual smack down was set up in which both Elijah and the false prophets would build altars and whatever deity answered with fire would be declared the winner.

So why did Elijah choose Mount Carmel for this match? Because this mountain was considered to be the dwelling place of Baal, thus giving Baal

home-field advantage. That made the victory even bigger when Elijah's God was the only one who sent fire from heaven.

Just asking the *who, what, when, where* and *why* questions will help us correctly understand verses in their context and enable us to apply the Scriptures to our context.

Pastor Tim has done a great job putting together some additional questions to ask on the reverse side of the monthly Bible reading plans.

- Observation: *What does it say?*
- Interpretation: *What does it mean?*
- Application: *How do I respond?*

Remember the Bible is not just for information; it's been given for our transformation. Mark Twain, not known as a follower of Christ, wrote these words: *"It ain't the parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it's the parts that I do understand."*

The acrostic **S.P.E.C.S.** is a helpful way to apply the Scriptures. Ask yourself if there's a...

- **Sin to confess**
- **Promise to claim**
- **Example to follow**
- **Command to obey**
- **Stumbling block to avoid**

The story is told of a South Sea Islander who proudly displayed his Bible to an American soldier during WWII. A missionary had given him this Bible a few years earlier. The soldier looked at the Bible with disdain and with arrogance in his voice said, *"Oh, we've outgrown that sort of thing."* The native smiled back and said, *"Well, it's a good thing we haven't, because if it weren't for this book, you would be our evening meal!"*

Here are some practical steps to make sure you get the Scriptures right.

- **Read the Bible everyday using a Study Bible and follow the EBC reading plan.** The May plan will be called “The Lord and His Church” from the Book of Acts.
- **Utilize the Edgewood app or website** to watch or listen or read the sermon again.
- **Join a Sunday morning or mid-week Growth Group.**
- **Utilize Right Now Media.** There’s a new study on the site by Kyle Idleman called, “The Good Book” that looks really good. There are also some studies of the land of Israel that will help your understanding of Bible events.

Let’s not be like those Jesus referred to in Mark 12:24: ***“Are you not in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God?”***

In preparation for our grandson Pip coming to visit this past week, I needed to pick up some batteries for some play power tools someone gave him. I walked into a Dollar General and looked around but didn’t see any. I decided to ask an employee for some help. When I asked her where the batteries were, she smirked and pointed to the sign right in front of me. I was standing right next to the batteries and didn’t even know it! I felt like a fool.

Friend, the Bible is standing right next to us! In one sense it’s easy to understand. At the same time, it will take a lifetime of learning to fully interpret and apply it.

I want us to end by pledging our allegiance to the Bible. The first part of this pledge is received in our 1st through 3rd grade Sunday School class each week.

I pledge allegiance to the Bible, God’s holy Word. I will make it a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path. I will hide God’s Word in my heart that I might not sin against Him. By God’s grace I will determine to understand the text of the Bible in context. With the Holy Spirit’s enablement, I will stay hungry and I will work hard at correctly handling the Word of God because how I handle God’s Word determines whether I’ll be an approved worker or an ashamed wanderer. Amen.